

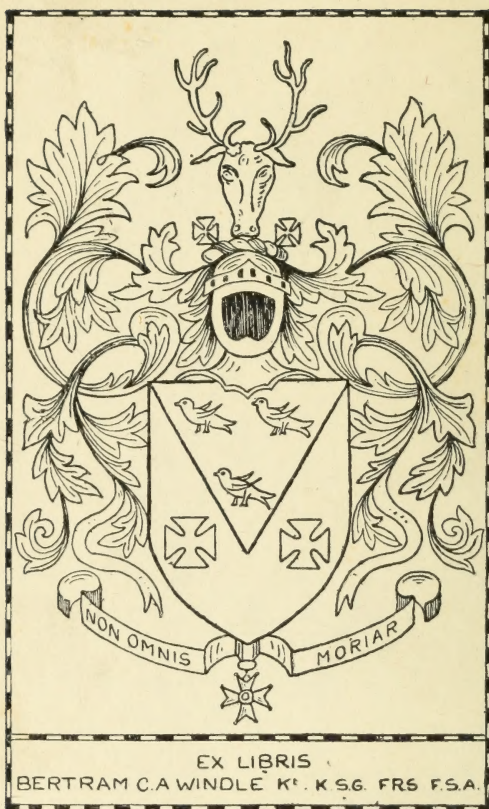
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COVENTRY



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*Henry VI.
from the painting in the National Portrait Gallery.*

The Story of **Coventry**
by Mary Dormer Harris
Illustrated by Albert Chanler



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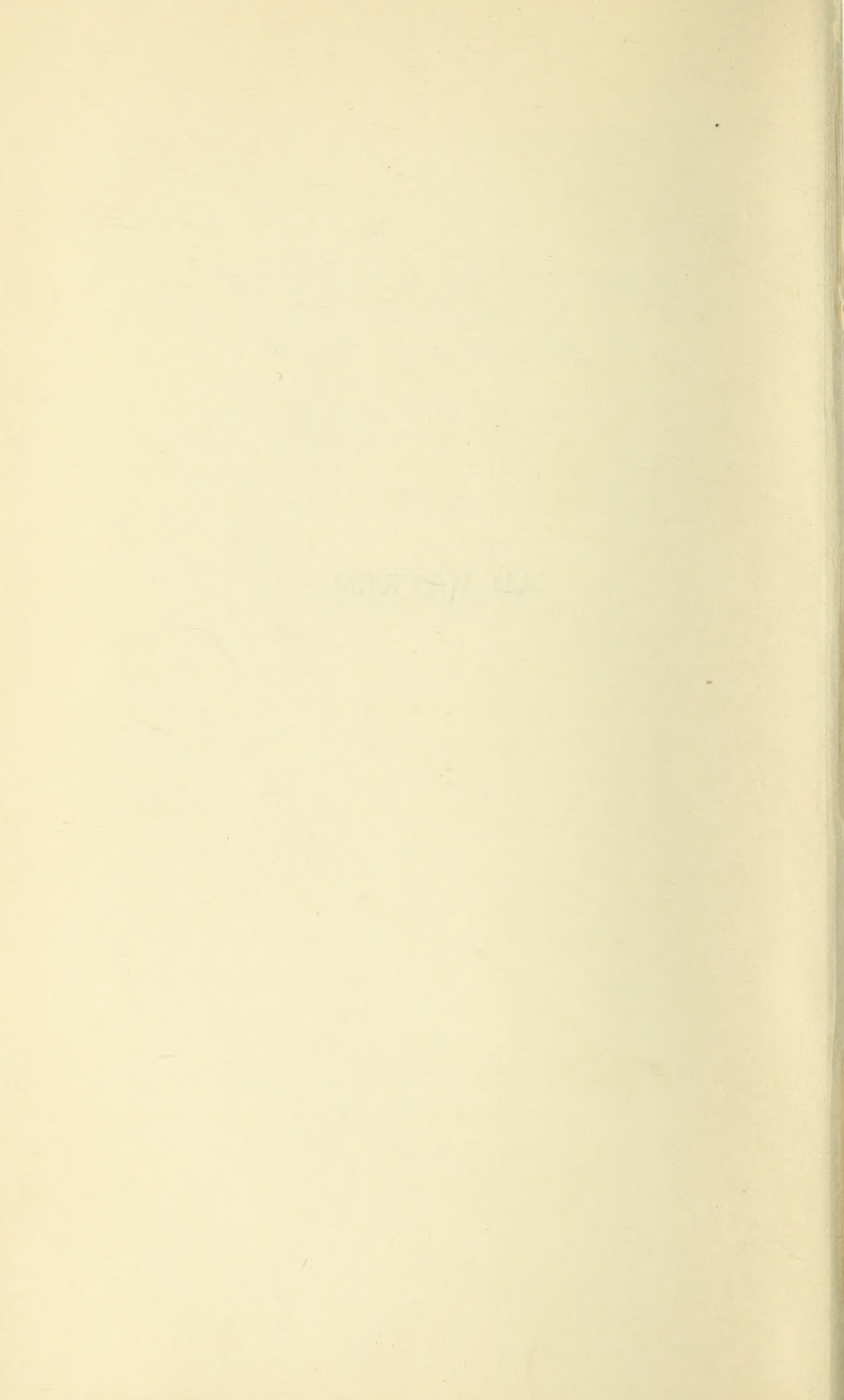
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PREFACE

IN preparing this volume for the press I have omitted some of the matter in *Life in an Old English Town*, which did not seem suitable for this series, and added fresh material likely to be useful to those who wished to identify the historic sites, and see the historic buildings of Coventry. In expanding Chapter XV. in so far as it dealt with the Corpus Christi plays—a task the labours of Dr Hardin Craig have rendered comparatively light—I have been able to add one hitherto unpublished item to the subject of the mediæval dramatic history of Coventry (p. 296), and dispel the idea that the name “S. Crytyan” given to a play acted in 1505 is a misreading for S. Catherine. For permission to publish this item I am indebted to the kindness of Mr William Page, F.S.A., editor of the *Victoria County History*. Another point remotely bearing upon the pageants is the chronology of royal visits to Coventry (p. 288), which I have endeavoured to clear up as far as I could, Sharp’s *Dissertation on the Coventry Mysteries*, the usual guide in these matters, being extremely faulty in this respect on account of the confusion which prevails in the MS. annals or mayor-lists, on which he depended for dates. Of these extant lists, both in print and in MS., I have given a detailed account (p. 106) in connection with the entry concern-

Preface

ing Prince Henry's supposed arrest by Mayor Hornby, a matter which, in view of the Shakespearean interest involved, is more fully treated of here than in my previous book.

My thanks are due to Mr J. Munro and the Early English Text Society for the kind permission to print extracts from Dr Craig's *Two Corpus Christi Plays* and from my own edition of the *Leet Book*. To Mr George Sutton, Town Clerk of Coventry, and all the unfailing courteous officials with whom I so constantly came in contact during my work, I must (not for the first time) express my gratitude. My obligations to Messrs Longmans and the Society of Antiquaries for permission to print portions of Chapters XII. and XIII. respectively have been acknowledged in my previous work.

MARY DORMER HARRIS

LEAMINGTON, Aug. 7, 1911.

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The Story of Coventry

INTRODUCTION

The Three Spires and Coventry

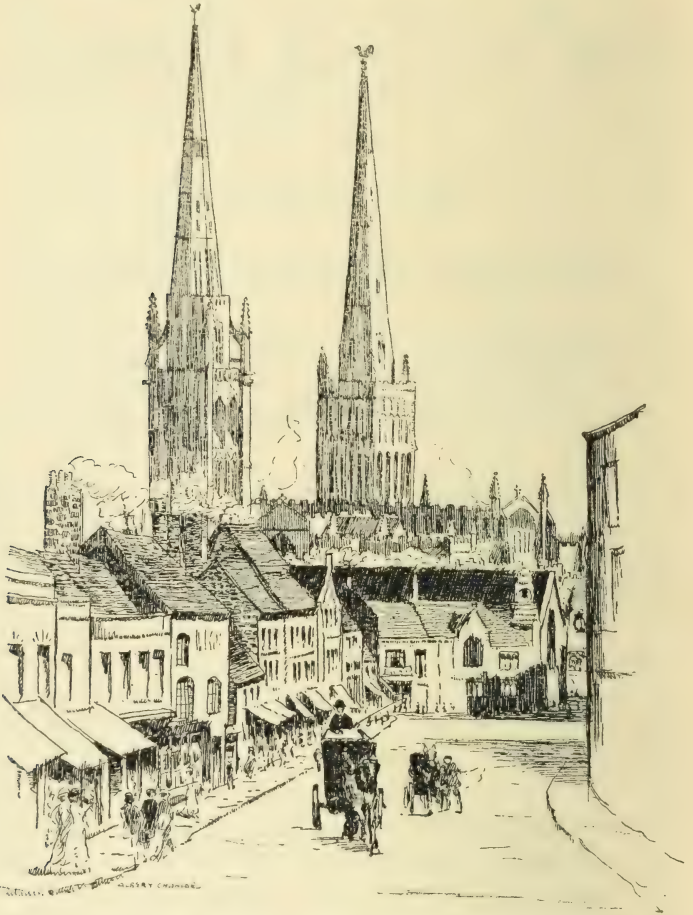
“ Now flourishing with fanes, and proud pyramidès,
Her walls in good repair, her ports so bravely built,
Her halls in good estate, her cross so richly gilt,
As scorning all the Towns that stand within her view.”

DRAYTON, *Polyolbion*, xiii.

TIME has brought many changes since old Drayton thus vaunted the stateliness of Coventry. The walls, the cross are gone, and of the twelve stately gates, but two remain. Gone, too, is the splendid conduit in the Cross Cheaping, S. Nicholas' Hall in the West Orchard, meeting-place of the Corpus Christi guild; and S. Nicholas' Church, out to the north beyond Bishop Street, which fell to ruin soon after the Reformation. But the “proud pyramidès,” the “three spires,” remain yet, and give greeting to all who approach Coventry, dominating the flat midland country for many a mile, changing their relative position as the spectator moves, and their colour in the shifting lights. Highest and fairest of all — so “the Archangel,” says Fuller, “eclipse the Trinity,” — is the nine-storied belfry of S. Michael's, tower, octagon and spire, a wonderful example of symbolism of design and harmonious disposal of ornament. The tower, begun in 1373, was the gift — says tradition — of the men of the Botoner family, the

The Story of Coventry

spire of its women, not the least among the many noteworthy achievements that in Coventry history are linked with a woman's name.



THE TWO SPIRES FROM TOP OF BISHOP STREET

Such a medley is Coventry that the great steeple overshadows quiet, memory-haunted places, and streets filled with the clamour of traffic, pleasant houses rich men have lately built, and squalid courts, that occupy

The Three Spires and Coventry

the site of many an ancient burgage croft and garden. It is a typically English city, whose history might serve as the "abstract and brief chronicle" of England. A thoroughly corrupt borough in the worst days of municipal corruption, rigidly Puritan under the Stuarts, loyal under Elizabeth, steady for hereditary right at Mary's accession—but Protestant, as witness its martyrs—Lollard in the hey-day of Lollardry, patriotic and Talbot-worshipping in the Hundred Years' War—as England was, so was Coventry. In art and letters, also, the city recalls what is most characteristic in the achievements of the English people. Here flourished mediæval architecture, an art wherein Englishmen have excelled greatly, and the mediæval religious drama, foundation of Shakespeare's greatness; while chance, and the sojourn of George Eliot, have given the city associations with the literary outburst of the Victorian time.

The doings of Coventry folk or the happenings within the city must have impressed the minds of generations of English folk, since the name has entered into folk rhymes¹ and flower names, and proverbial English speech. Old botanists speak of "Coventry bells" and "Coventry Marians," where now we say "Canterbury bells"; children play card-games called "Peeping Tom" or "Moll of Coventry"; and we still, by silent avoidance of our friends, "send them to Coventry," a reminiscence maybe of the uncivil treatment the city Roundheads gave to imprisoned Cavaliers what time the bitterness engendered by the Civil War was abroad in the land.

Interesting too—albeit scanty—are the relics of legendary lore and heathen custom which oftentimes perplex the student of the city's history. Here was played the Hox-Tuesday play, survival, say folklorists, of the struggle to gain possession of a victim for the

¹ Northall, *Eng. Folk Rhymes*, 403.

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sacrifice; here the national legend of Godiva grew up; and here, men fabled, S. George, patron of England, was born.

In the country round about Coventry two Englands meet, one a land of green woods and well-watered pastures, the other black with the toil of the coal-fields. The city turns its most prosperous side southwards, and the common view of the spires is the one from the south, where the tree-bordered road from Kenilworth, whereon so many kings and queens have travelled, slips into Coventry, past a fringe of ample, comfortable houses, that the well-to-do have raised in our own time. This was Tennyson's view of the spires, and George Eliot must have seen it daily in her school-life, which she passed in the house that is farthest from the town in Warwick Row. It is the common view, but not the most interesting, since the octagonal Decorated steeple of Christchurch, recased in fresh stone, last remnant of the now demolished church of the Greyfriars, is the least commanding of the three, and by its nearness somewhat dwarfs the rest. The Greyfriars of Coventry, be it said, have gained by a scribe's error, a probably quite unmerited fame as producers of the noted *Corpus Christi* plays; in reality, this honour should belong to the lay-folk and crafts-people of the city.

It is well—so the journey is made from the south—to gain a more distant view of the “proud pyramids” over the flat fields from the Stoneleigh Road, where Christchurch falls into its proper place. The trees make the way through Stoneleigh a lovely one, and the village church, redolent of eighteenth century peace, with a magnificent Norman chancel arch, furnishes a fine excuse for delay. Nearer to Coventry the way winds on over Finham Bridge, shadowed by poplars, and through Stivichall, a hamlet the widow of Earl Ranulf of Chester gave to the Bishop of Lichfield for the welfare of her husband's soul. Allotment gardens and newly-built

The Three Spires and Coventry

streets occupy the land to the south-east of the city, formerly known as the Little Park, once part of a royal estate. It is a commonplace-looking site nowadays, albeit thronged with memories. Here Lollard sermons have been preached and miracle-plays played, and hither Laurence Saunders and others were led out to be burned



in 1556, on ground now occupied by a factory, where once long after men discovered charred fragments of a stake. They are building streets over the Park area by the station nowadays; but this was a practice inaugurated long ago when Much Park Street (*vicus parci maioris*) and Little Park Street (*vicus parci minoris*) were built on ground cut out of the royal estate. The east end of

The Story of Coventry

Little Park Street may be reached by Park Road, past a newly-raised memorial to the Coventry martyrs.

Much Park Street led by Whitefriars through Newgate to the London Road; Little Park Street led but to a postern gate. In Stuart times the latter road had little traffic and much social dignity; beautiful houses stood therein with spacious gardens, where dwelt the neighbouring gentry, who were wont to enjoy the amenities of urban life for a season, a common feature of the social life of country towns at that period. Sir Orlando Bridgman's house, most magnificent example of these gentlefolks' dwellings, was wantonly demolished in the early nineteenth century, though the Jacobean mantel-piece from the presence-chamber is still preserved in the school at Bablake. The street still retains in Banner House, and a lovely little quadrangle of the time of William III., relics of the grandeur of that bygone time.

The London Road comes past Whitley, a manor held in the fifteenth century by William Bristow, the most troublesome and litigious person in Coventry history, and Shortley, where in Edward II.'s time, one John de Nottingham, a necromancer, dwelled, concerning whom there is much to be found in this book. At Shortley is the Charter-house where, incorporated in a modern dwelling, are remains of the Carthusian monastery, which the Botoners helped to build, and whereof Richard II. was patron. Wayfarers from London and Daventry (Shakespeare's "Daintry") entered the town at Newgate by Whitefriars, the modern work-house. At Newgate the mural circuit was begun in 1356, when Richard Stoke, mayor, laid the first stone. Here, too, in August 1642, Charles I. made a breach in the town wall, whereat divers Cavaliers found entrance; but so vehement was the onslaught made upon them by the townsfolk—men and women—and so impregnable were the citizens' barricades of carts and furniture, that the Royalists withdrew discomfited. Another breach



A COURTYARD IN LITTLE PARK STREET

The Three Spires and Coventry

in the wall, twenty years later, made also at Newgate, marked the beginning of the work of dismantling the fortifications. This was done by order of Charles II. to avenge the old affront offered to his father, and occupied 500 men for three weeks and three days. The superstitious found in the destruction of the walls the subject of one of the famous Mother Shipton's prophecies. It was foretold, they said, "that a pigeon should pull them down," and in truth they were dismantled in Thomas Pigeon's mayoral year.¹

From Little Park Street only two spires are seen; and but the same number is visible in Bishop Street,



REMAINS OF OLD WALL—BACK OF GODIVA STREET

which lies to the north. The traveller comes almost suddenly into the turmoil of this street from the pleasant uplands of Fillongley, where the Hastings' family had a castle, and the Shakespears a farm-house, and Corley, of George Eliot memories, with its prehistoric camp on the Rock. It is good to see but two spires, that it may serve as a reminder that the church of the Greyfriars is but an unessential feature in Coventry history. The twin steeples of S. Michael's and Trinity represent the two parishes—the two estates, Earl's-half and Prior's-half—which anciently composed the city.

Maybe these two steeples look most magnificent in the twilight from Poolmeadow, formerly covered by a sheet of water known as S. Osburg's Pool. This is a

¹ Mayor-list or MS. Annals (eighteenth century) in the possession of Mr Eynon of Leamington.

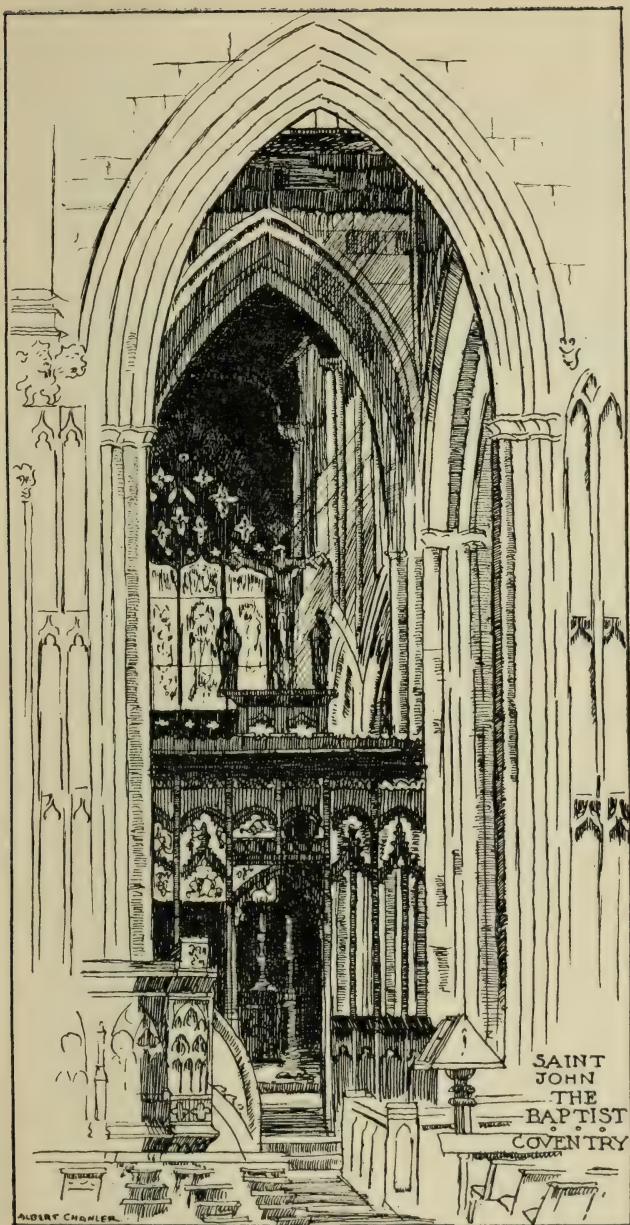
The Story of Coventry

bare place running east and west of Priory Street, to the north of the site of the ancient monastery. By daylight the surroundings of Poolmeadow are unbeautiful enough, yet it is in some respects the most interesting spot in Coventry, since it is connected with the earliest name that occurs in Coventry history.

What connection there was between the Saint, whose nunnery the Danes destroyed, and this pool, we know not. At her shrine in the priory were miracles wrought, and her head seems to have appeared among the relics treasured by the religious house at the Dissolution.

Another non-parochial church comes very prominently into view when the approach is made from the south-west, Canley and Hearsall, though I imagine that few enter by those by-lanes save the ruddy, brown-gaitered farmers on their way to the Friday market. This is the guild-church of S. John the Baptist at Bablake, whereof the tower, that has a fortress-like touch, rises high above the roofs of the town. Even the sea-element is not lacking in the history of this inland city, since the guild brethren declared that they wished to raise this church in part as a memorial "for the good success the king had upon the sea" upon S. John's day—probably at the battle of Sluys, June 24, 1340.¹ Hard by this church and the collegiate buildings clustered behind it stood Bablake Gate, and all who came by the great highway leading from the north-west—now called the Holyhead Road—made their entrance there. Before coming to Bablake, however, wayfarers would cross the Sherbourne at Spon, close by the chapel of S. James and S. Christopher, now incorporated in a modern dwelling-place. Here they would, belike, pay their devotions just as other travellers coming from London and Daventry paid theirs at the Lady Tower, wherein

¹ Morris, *S. John's Church*.

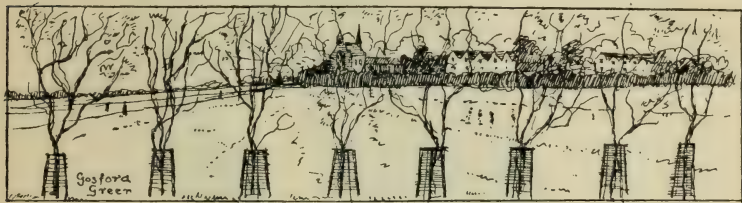


SAINT
JOHN
THE
BAPTIST
COVENTRY

The Three Spires and Coventry

was a wooden image of our Lady, hard by Newgate and Whitefriars.

Smithford Street, which reminds us of the early activity of the workers in iron, leads to Bablake, and by the bridge there tradition says that there grew a



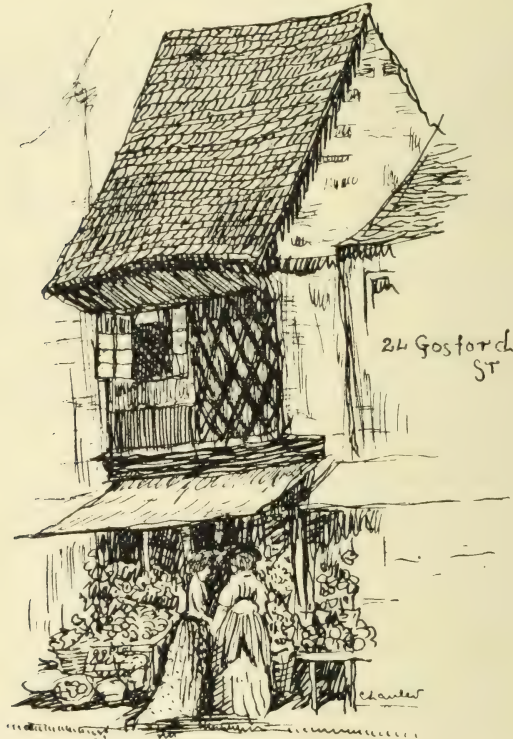
great tree "that from the strangeness of the fruit was called Quient" (quaint), an imaginary etymology of the name Coventry. Modern scholars are, however, agreed that it was from some memorable (and possibly sacred) tree that the earliest form of the word "Cofantreo" is derived.

To those who look on the spires from Gosford and the eastern side the tall ones appear in their relatively close proximity. This is the entrance to Coventry where most historical associations abound. "Two dukes should 'a fought on Gosford Green," succinctly say the city annals in 1397, but, as all the world knows, Richard II. forbade Bolingbroke and Mowbray to fight. Sinister memories for the House of York are connected with the Green, for here in 1469 Queen Elizabeth, Woodville's father, Lord Rivers, and her brother, John, were beheaded by Warwick's orders. It is said that it was on this side of the city that Edward IV. advanced in 1471, what time the Kingmaker held the city against him. Further west, beyond Far Gosford Street, is Dover Bridge, whereon once stood S. George's Chapel, meeting-place of the tailors and shearmen's guild, demolished in 1821. Outside this chapel once

The Story of Coventry

hung the blade-bone of the dun-cow, slain, says the legend, by Guy of Warwick of famous memory.

In Gosford Street, long, ancient and grimy, was formerly the first station for the performances of the pageants; and in Cox Street, anciently Mill Lane,



which runs to the north of Gosford, were the pageant-houses or places for storage of theatrical paraphernalia owned by the crafts. From Gosford the long thoroughfare street passes into Jordan Well—commemorating the well sunk by Jordan Shepey, mayor of Coventry, who died 1349, the year of the Black Death—and thence into Earl Street, where, it may be, a castle of the Earls of Chester once stood with an entrance at Broadgate.

The Three Spires and Coventry

To see the spire of S. Michael's alone it is best to leave this long thoroughfare and turn to the right by a half-timbered Tudor house down the narrowness of Pepper Lane where the immense steeple almost seems to blot out the sky.



CHAPTER I

Leofric and Godiva

[T was ever the boast of Coventry men that their city was of "much fame and antiquity,"¹ being "remembered," so John Throgmorton, the recorder, assured Queen Elizabeth, "by Polydore Vergil to be of . . . small account in the time of King Arviragus (which was forty-four years after our Saviour) in the Emperor Claudius' time."² And Shakespeare's contemporary, Michael Drayton, had a pretty fancy of his own concerning the place,³ whereby its antiquity is made manifest. He tells us how, when Coventry was but "a poor thatched village," the saint of Cologne brought thither

"That goodly virgin-band
Th' eleven thousand maids chaste Ursula's command,"

who at departing,

"Each by her just bequest,
Some special virtue gave, ordaining it to rest
With one of her own sex";

which special virtues, the poet adds, were in aftertimes bestowed on Godiva, "that most princely dame," who freed Coventry from toll on the occasion of her famous ride.

But of all this history tells us nothing, even as it tells us nothing of Vespasian's visit to Exeter, or the found-

¹ Harl. MS. 6195 f. 7.

² Poole, *Coventry*, 90. Elizabeth visited the city in 1565.

³ *Polyolbion*, xiii.

Leofric and Godiva

ing of London by Brutus of Troy, in the days when the foundations of Rome were not laid. Coventry is not old in the sense wherein we apply the word to Colchester, York, Bath, or Winchester, and many towns dating from Roman or early Saxon times. If the site of the present city were ever occupied by the Romans—and the point is a doubtful one—their occupation left no permanent traces.¹ But just as families love to boast of a high and noble ancestry, so dwellers in cities and members of institutions delight to trace their origins back to a legendary past, and the fables of Brut, who came from Troy to London, or the story of Mempric, contemporary of David, and founder of the university of Oxford,² were once accepted as truth. We, however, are content to leave this record of obscure beginnings unexplored, confessing that we have, as Dugdale says, “so little light of story to guide us through those elder times.”³

In truth, we hear nothing authentic concerning the Romans’, and but rumours of the Danes’, coming to Coventry. In 1016 the Northmen, led by Canute and the traitor Eadric Streona, laid waste the Midlands, and are said to have destroyed a nunnery on the spot founded by an obscure Saxon saint, the virgin Osburg, who probably came from the neighbouring house for nuns at Polesworth.⁴ But S. Osburg is a shadowy figure, and the memory of her foundation has almost entirely passed away. The convent of the “convent town,”⁵ did not gather together there until the middle

¹ Some rough (?) Roman pavement was discovered in the Cross Cheaping during excavations at the end of the last century. *Victoria County Hist.* i. 246.

² Rashdall, *Universities*, ii. pt. ii. 323.

³ Dugdale, *Warw.* i. 134.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ A convent is properly a *body* of monks or nuns; a monastery or nunnery their habitation. The etymology of Coventry is dubious; but the popular derivation from the

The Story of Coventry

of the eleventh century, when Leofric, Earl of Mercia, and his wife Godiva, built a dwelling for an Abbot and twenty-four monks to live under the rule of S. Benedict. Thus was laid the first stone of a monastery which ranked with the Confessor's Abbey of Westminster, King Harold's College at Waltham, and the twin abbeys built by William I. and Matilda in their city of Caen, among the most famous foundations of that age. The monastery became the nucleus of a thriving town in later days, as was the case with Bury S. Edmund's, Abingdon, Reading, S. Alban's, and many other places in England.

It was a great time for the founding of religious houses, and the Confessor, as befitted one of known sanctity of life, greatly encouraged these pious deeds. "It behoves every man," . . . runs his charter to the monks of Coventry, "diligently to incline to almsgiving, whereby he may release himself from the bonds of sin. For our Lord in a sermon thus speaketh: 'Lay up for yourselves with alms-deeds a treasure-hoard in heaven, and a dwelling with angels.'¹ For which needful things I make known to you all that I grant with full permission that the same gift which Leofric and Godgyuæ have given to Christ, and His dear Mother, and to Leofwin, the abbot, and the brethren within the minster at Coventry, for their souls to help, in land and in water, in gold and in silver, in ornaments, and in all other things, as full and as forth as they themselves possessed it, and as they that same minster worthily have enriched therewith, so I firmly grant it. And furthermore, I grant to them also, for my soul, that they

Lat. *conventus* is now discredited. The earliest form in which the word occurs is Cofantreo. Here *treo*=tree, and Dr Hen. Bradley, to whom I am greatly indebted for information on this point, suggests a possible origin of the other syllables in a personal name, Cofa or Cufa; cf. Oswestry=Oswald's tree.

¹ See Matt. v. 20. This translation mainly follows Birch.

Leofric and Godiva

have besides full freedom, sac and soc,¹ toll, team,² hamsozne,³ foresteall,⁴ blodewite,⁵ fihthwite,⁶ weardwite,⁷ and mundbryce.⁸ Now I will henceforward that it ever be a dwelling of monks, and let them stand in God's peace, and S. Mary's and in mine, and according to S. Benedict's rule, under the abbot's authority. And I will not in any wise consent that any man take away or eject their gift and their alms, or that any man have there any charge upon any things, or at any season, except the abbot and his brethren for this minster's need. And whosoever shall increase this alms with any good the Lord shall increase unto him Heaven's bliss; and whosoever shall take them away, or deprive the minster of anything at any time, let him stand in God's anger, and His dear Mother's and mine. God keep you all."⁹

Thus the monastery was endowed by Leofric and Godiva with twenty-four lordships of land; and by the king with full rights of jurisdiction over the tenants dwelling in these various estates, privileges greatly valued by the monks. They laid the two generous founders, the husband in one porch, the wife in the other, of the minster in Coventry, when they came to die. As for this building, it was one of the glories of the age, and seemed too narrow, a chronicler tells us, to contain the abundance of treasure within its walls. Godiva paid the most famous goldsmiths of her day to visit the place, and make reliquaries and images of saints to beautify the church she

¹ Privilege of administering justice.

² Obscure. Birch says privilege of vouching to warranty.

³ Power to punish for forcible entry.

⁴ Power to inflict punishment for waylaying.

⁵ Power to punish assault with bloodshed.

⁶ Power to punish assault.

⁷ Power to maintain watch.

⁸ Power to punish for breach of peace.

⁹ Add. MSS. Ch. 28657. Birch, *Edward the Confessor's Charter to Coventry*. "A most elegant specimen of eleventh century native palæography" (Birch).

The Story of Coventry

loved ; she also gave a rosary of gems to hang about the neck of an image of the Virgin, her chief patroness. The monks, too, gathered in a great store of relics, whereof the most famous was an arm of S. Augustine of Hippo, brought from Pavia by Archbishop Ethelnoth, having been purchased for the sum of one hundred talents of silver and a talent of gold.

Of this minster, however, nought remains, and its successor, the Gothic cathedral, was destroyed after the Reformation. The legend of its foundress has been more enduring. Vulgarised by later associations, the narrative, in its early forms, has a grandeur which still impresses the imagination. The story was a favourite one with Landor from his boyhood, though his *Imaginary Conversation*, and Drayton's brief lines are less popularly known than the poem of Tennyson. There is no contemporary evidence to guide us, for Roger of Wendover, whose account of the famous ride is probably the earliest we possess, died in 1237,¹ some hundred and fifty years after the noble lady herself. The chroniclers differ as to the motive which prompted the undertaking, some asserting that the Coventry folk were to be freed thereby from a grievous incident of villeinage ; others again² connecting it with the local immunity from the payment of toll—except for horses, a special feature of the market of Coventry.³ It is in the latter connection that the story has impressed itself on the local mind.

¹ On events which occur before 1154 (or 1188) the chronicler is dependent on some earlier unknown writer (*Dict. Nat. Biography*, s.v. "Godiva").

² They follow Higden, author of the *Polychronicon*, who was the first to mention the ride in this connection. As a monk of S. Werburgh's, Chester, a city which held frequent intercourse with Coventry, he may have had opportunities of hearing the tale from local sources.

³ In Coventry market the burgesses were free from toll, except for horses, in the time of Edward I. (Dugdale, *Warw.* i. 162).

Leofric and Godiva

“I Lueriche for the love of thee
Doe make Coventre Tol-free,”

was written under a window placed in Trinity Church in Richard II.'s time in commemoration of the deed.¹

“This cite shulde be free, and now is bonde,
Dame goode Eve made hit free,”

wrote a discontented burger poet of the fifteenth century, when a custom for wool had been laid on the people of the town.²

Roger of Wendover tells us how the countess besought her husband continually, with many prayers to free the people from the toll; and though he refused and forbade her to approach him with this petition, “led by her womanly pertinacity,” she repeated the request, until he gave answer: “Ride naked through the length of the market, when the people are gathered together, and when thou returnest, thy petition shall be fulfilled. . . . Then the countess, beloved of God, loosened her hair thus veiling her body, and then, mounting her horse and attended by two knights, she rode through the market seen of none, her white legs nevertheless appearing; and having completed her journey, returned to her husband rejoicing, and . . . obtained from him what she had asked,” for he forthwith gave the townsfolk a charter emancipating them from the aforesaid service.³

Naturally, the charter is not forthcoming, and historians have shrugged their shoulders at the mention of the story this many a day. It was not, however, until the time of Charles II. that the Godiva procession became a feature of Coventry fair. In 1678, we are told “Lady

¹ Dugdale, *Warw.* i. 135. Some tiny fragments of this window yet remain in the Archdeacon's Chapel of Trinity Church. See also *Gent. Mag.* (1829), pt. i. 120-1, for another account of the fragment.

² *Leet Book* (E.E.T.S.), 567.

³ Rog. Wendover, *Flores Historiarum*, i. 497.

The Story of Coventry

Godiva rode before the mayor to proclaim the fair” and the custom thus inaugurated obtains to this day. Of the window noted by Dugdale all traces disappeared amid the vandalism of the eighteenth century save a few fragments of glass now in the Archdeacon’s chapel of Trinity Church, and of these one showing a tiny figure in a yellow dress riding a white horse and holding some foliage in the hand, is traditionally said to have formed part of the original design.¹

Such is the story which some accept undoubting,



GODIVA WINDOW

others dismiss as fabulous, and a third school, following the lead of Mr Hartland² and perceiving in the tale elements which occur in the folk-lore of widely distant countries, regard as a reminiscence of heathen ritual, maybe some processional festivities of spring or summer.³ In support of this contention it may be urged that the story is not peculiar to Coventry, that there is a good deal of evidence showing the part unclad or bough-clad

¹ So an old sexton told Sharp, the antiquary. See also *Gent. Mag. Topography*, xiii. 53.

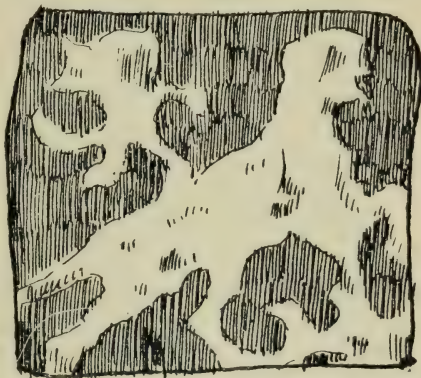
² *Science of Fairy Tales*.

³ Chambers, *Mediæval Stage*, i. 119.

Leofric and Godiva

women played in magical and religious rites,¹ that black-faced characters—whereof more presently—appear in festivals manifestly derived from heathendom, and that the “Peeping Tom” element may be part of the universal fairy tale which relates the punishment awaiting those who pry into sights forbidden. Moreover, the prominence given to the horse in the story is extremely suggestive.

In one version it is the neighing of Godiva’s steed that attracts the attention of the peeper, causing him to look forth from the window, whence it comes that in Coventry market there is no exemption from toll for horses.² It may not be too fanciful to recall in this connection



HERALDIC TILE FOUND IN HALES STREET

the part played by the hobby-horse at folk-festivals, and the sacrificial character of the horse in Teutonic heathendom.³

The nearest variant of the Coventry story belongs to St Briavel’s in the Forest of Dean, like Coventry a woodland district. Here it is said that the wife of one of the Earls of Hereford won from her lord privileges

¹ Grant Allen, *Evolution of the Idea of God*, 110 (festival of the Pòtraj).

² Hartland, *op. cit.*, 77.

³ As a tyro in folk-lore I venture with some diffidence to put forward the theory that it may be by research in custom and belief as regards the horse that we may arrive at an explanation of some of the problems of this mysterious legend. See Grimm, *Teut. Myth.* (trans. Stallybrass), 47, 392; Frazer, *Golden Bough*, ii. 24, 64; Gomme, *Ethnology and Folk-lore*, 35; Chambers, *op. cit.*, i. 131.

The Story of Coventry

of woodcutting for the commonalty by undergoing a like ordeal.¹ In a Dunster tradition the parallel is not so close. Here Sir John de Mohun's wife gained from her husband for the Dunster folk as much common land as she could make the circuit of, barefoot, in a day's space.²

Godiva is always traditionally represented riding on a white horse. It is curious that in an illuminated document formerly in possession of the Smiths' company, two Godivas appear, one a white woman on a white horse and another a black woman on an elephant—the last in allusion to the elephant and castle, the arms of the city.³ Black-a-vised characters—explained by various theories⁴—are of common occurrence at festivals on May Day and Midsummer; it is only about forty years ago that a Jack-o'-green and his attendant sweeps ceased to parade the city on May Day, while at Southam, near Coventry, and possibly in Coventry also, a "black lady" rode in the "show fair" as well as Godiva.⁵

As for the "Peeping Tom" incident it may well be older than the eighteenth century, when the first printed allusion appears.⁵ A ballad written about 1650 mentions that Godiva ordered all persons to keep within doors during her ride and shut their windows⁶; but in a Coventry version given in the MS. city annals⁷—dating, it appears, before the use of glass became common in

¹ Rudder, *Gloucestershire*, 307 (quoted Hartland).

² Camden, *Britannia* (Gibson), 67. I am indebted to Mr Addy for this reference; cf. the story of the Tichbourne dole, Chambers, *Book of Days*, i. 167.

³ *Coventry Standard*, Jan. 15-16, 1909. The MS. (1684-1833) has passed into private hands, and I have never been able to see it.

⁴ Sir Lawrence Gomme explains the black Godiva by a reference to Pliny's account of the woad-stained British women, but see Chambers, *Mediæval Stage*, i. 125.

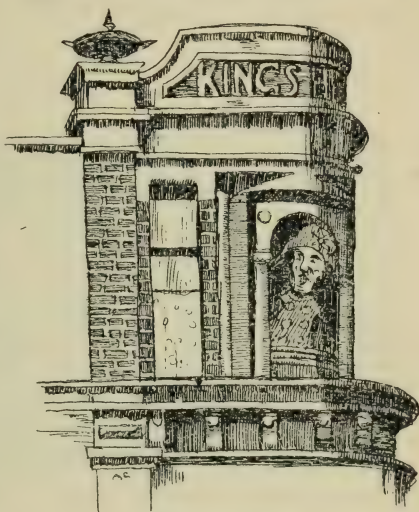
⁵ *Science of Fairy Tales*, 71-92. Mr Hartland was the first folklorist to submit the story to scientific investigation. He gained his local knowledge of the Southam black Godiva from the late W. E. Fretton of Coventry.

⁶ See *Dict. Nat. Biog.*, s.v. "Godiva."

⁷ Hartland, *op. cit.*, 77.

Leofric and Godiva

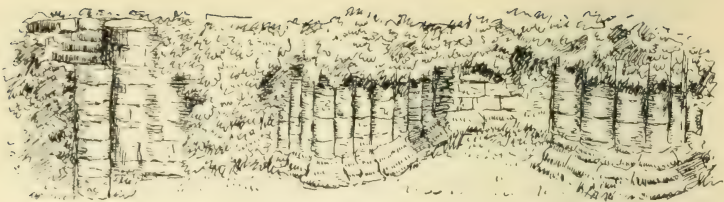
domestic buildings—the peeper is said to “let down” a window, *i.e.* the wooden shutter of early times. The famous figure of Peeping Tom, mentioned in the city accounts in the year 1773,¹ still looks out of the north-east top window of the “King’s Head” in Hertford Street. It is a wooden figure, thought to represent S. George, with armour of the time of Henry VII., broad-toed solerets, and under a monstrous and absurd three-cornered hat is a bascinet. The arms, as far as the elbow, have been hacked away, and to the spectator in the street the figure is only visible from the waist upwards.



PEEPIING TOM

For many people Coventry suggests Godiva. It is always well to bear in mind she was an authentic person, wife of Leofric, mother of Aelfgar, Earl of East Anglia, also buried in the monastery, grandmother of the Earls Edwin and Morkere, and of Aldgyth, first wife, then widow, of Gruffydd, Prince of Wales; then wife and widow of Harold, King of England. After Godiva's death, stories of her holy life and alms-deeds would be soon rife among the oppressed Saxons. It is noteworthy that Matilda, queen of Henry I., a sovereign of the old Saxon blood royal, and a most pious princess to boot, was called Godiva, no doubt in scorn of her birth, by the Norman courtiers.

¹ See *Dict. Nat. Biog.*, s.v. “Godiva.”



CATHEDRAL RUINS

CHAPTER II

The Benedictine Monastery

THE Benedictine house was built in part upon the northern slope of a low hill, in part in the hollow through which the river Sherbourne flows. This was a situation well adapted for the building of a monastery; there was rich soil in the neighbourhood, good roads—both the Watling Street and the Foss Way ran within a few miles from the spot—and running water. The Sherbourne is but a small stream nowadays, but it was a more important watercourse in earlier times, and in the fifteenth century many precautions had to be taken “in eschewing peril of floods.” The monks could stock Swanswell Pool¹ with fish, and plant their orchards or vineyards in or near the hollow in which the monastery lay.

Little remains of the minster save the bases of a few clustered pillars of the thirteenth century, the remains of

¹ Guy of Warwick also freed Coventry from a fabulous monster. In the last century there was still shown there “a great shield-bone of a bore (*sic*) which” he “slew in Hunting, when he (*i.e.* the boar) had turned with his Snout a great Put or Pond which is now called Swanswell, but Swineswell in times past.” Gough, *Collect. Warw.* (Bodleian Library).

The Benedictine Monastery

the west end by the Blue Coat School at the north end of S. Michael's Churchyard, and the fragment of the north-west tower, now incorporated in a dwelling-house in New Buildings. Under the gardens and pleasant red brick eighteenth and nineteenth century houses of Priory Row, which give the churchyard the look of a cathedral close, diggers often come upon fragments of



CARVED MISERERE SEAT, S. MICHAEL'S CHURCH

ancient masonry, showing how the cathedral stretched down the slope of the hill. Between the cathedral and the southern bank of the Sherbourne were the Priory buildings, with the cloister garth, locutorium or parlour, synodal chamber and grammar school,¹ which last had an endowed existence as early as 1303.

Another relic of the monastery, a beautiful old timbered hostry or guest house in Ironmonger Row, was only cleared away in 1820. The inn known as the "Palmer's Rest" now occupies a portion of this site, and carvings of hunting scenes, and grotesques worked into the window

¹ *Vic. Count. Hist. Warw.*, ii. 319.

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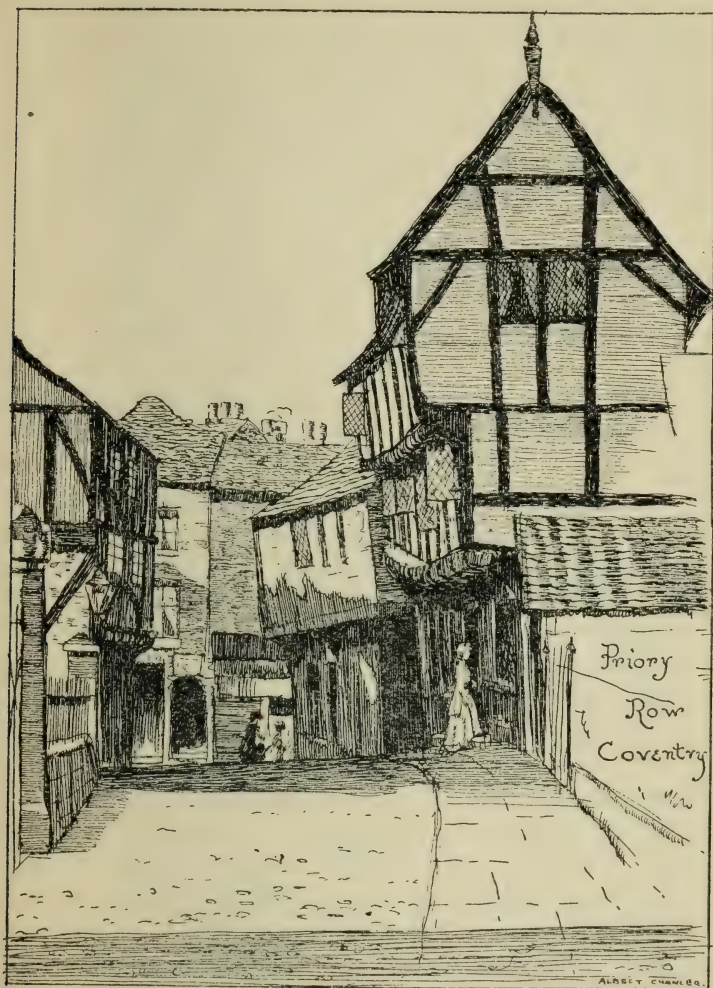
frames, and now painted a dreary brown, were taken from the ancient guest house of the monks. Some of the obligations of hospitality were lifted from the monks by the foundation in the twelfth century of the hospital of S. John the Baptist, whereof only the church is left. Here poor wayfarers had food and lodging and the sick poor of the place were nursed and tended. The brethren were clothed in a black or dark brown garb, ample and flowing, and marked with a black cross, and the sisters wore a white veil and long closed mantles or cloaks. Another foundation for the nursing of the sick was the lazar-hospital at Spon, dedicated to S. Mary Magdalen, of which not a trace remains.

The main feature of a monk's life was its well-ordered monotony, so congenial to many minds; but as a class monks were not specially addicted to idleness or solitude. Neither were they in most cases entirely devoted to spiritual things, for although the salvation of the individual soul was the primal object of monasticism, members of the religious orders were adepts at secular business, and did not suffer their houses to decay from neglect of the affairs of this world. There was always plenty of work for any monk possessing a clear head and a faculty for administration. The various officers of the convent, *obedientiarii* as they were called, had each his appointed task. Every one was allowed a certain proportion of the convent revenue to devote to the expenses connected with his office.¹ In return he presented his accounts at the annual audit, keeping them carefully and exactly, recording everything, down to the receipt of a pot of honey, "or the price of the parchment on which the various items were written." In the case of Coventry the rents of certain tenements in S. Nicholas Street, Bailey Lane, Well Street (*super corneram Vici Fontis*), among

¹ For a popular account of a monastery v. Jessopp, *Coming of the Friars*, 113-165.

The Benedictine Monastery

others, were assigned to the cellarer;¹ those coming from land in Keresley to the treasurer; the same forms



being observed with regard to the pitancier and sacristan. The rents paid in kind—butter, honey, eggs, etc.—were probably entered among the kitchener's receipts; while

¹ *Leet Book*, 448-9.

The Story of Coventry

the accounts, compiled from daily entries, must have given many clerks almost unceasing labour.

We have, unfortunately, no local chronicles,¹ such as those kept within the cloisters of S. Alban's, giving us particulars concerning the lives of the Coventry monks. But no doubt, in essentials, the management of various houses differed little. At Evesham, for example, the prior was bound to furnish the parchment required for the scriptorium, and all other writing materials except ink, out of the sum allotted to him. The manciple provided the wine, mead, oil and lamps, and kept up the stock of earthenware, jugs, basins, and other vessels required for the convent use. The precentor—as befitted one whose office was to train the choir—was bound to keep the organ in repair, and over and above to find all the ink and colour required for illumination, together with all materials for binding books. While to the chamberlain a certain revenue was assigned to provide for the clothing of the monks.² All these matters gave the convent officers daily occupation, and must have absorbed much thought and interest.

For those of fervent spirit the daily religious exercises were the salt of life, but for others—possibly the greater number—they were merely part of the daily routine, and repetition had increased monotony. Many hours of the day were passed in these regularly recurring services of the Church. At midnight the brethren rose and went to Matins and Lauds. Prime was celebrated at six, Tierce at nine, Sext at twelve, Nones at two or three, Vespers at four, and Complin at seven. After Tierce the duties of the day began; and the different obedientiaries went each to fulfil his appointed task. The rest sat in the cloisters, taught the children in the

¹ The chronicler, whose name—Walter of Coventry—seems to attest some local connection, was not a monk of this house. Stubbs, *Pref.* to Walter of Coventry (Rolls), I. xxii.-xxxiii.

² Jessopp, 138.

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school, or copied manuscripts. There were frequent consultations in the chapter-house, and on Sundays, before Prime or Tierce, the abbot sat in the cloisters to hear the monks' confessions, and appointed to each the penance due for his fault. Now and then the coming of an important stranger—a royal guest, perhaps, such as William the Conqueror, who passed, it is supposed, through Coventry on his way from Warwick to Nottingham in 1068—would furnish the brethren with a topic for many weeks' conversation.

Sometimes the brethren were suffered to have a glimpse of the great world without the convent with their own eyes. The prior, who was of the company of mitred abbots, was frequently forced to journey to whatever place the King might appoint for the meeting of the parliament. The rank and file of the convent had now and then opportunities of seeing life in travel. They might undertake a pilgrimage; or, when a dispute was on hand, and appeal had been made to the Holy Father, one of the brethren would journey Rome-wards, with well-lined pockets, to look after the convent's interest at the papal court. These lawsuits were not infrequent, as may be shown by the career of Geoffrey, Prior of Coventry during the reign of Henry III.¹ In 1224 the monks tried to raise him to the episcopal throne, but the election was quashed by the archbishop, and the usual appeal to Rome only brought another—a papal—candidate to fill the vacant seat. This occurrence did not in all probability predispose the minds of the actual and would-be bishop to mutual goodwill. In 1232 the prior was suspended for resisting the episcopal visitation, and, together with the abbot of Westminster, set out hot-foot to Rome, to lay his grievances before the Pope. A year or two later we find him involved in a quarrel with the Abbot of S. Augustine's, Bristol. What heart-

¹ Luard, *Annales Monastici*, iii. 90; i. 89-90.

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burnings these obscure disputes must have occasioned, what journeyings to and fro, and, above all, what wealth was lost to the monastery to satisfy the Roman greed of gold!

It is the record of these disputes that forms the bulk of the history of the monastic houses of England, and the priory of Coventry is no exception to the general rule. Placed in a somewhat dependent position—for during the episcopate of Robert de Limesey (1086-1121) the bishop's seat had been transferred from Chester to this place—the monks were, earlier or later, bound to realise the dangers of episcopal tyranny and encroachment. Limesey, the first bishop in whom the abbacy was vested—the superior of the convent being henceforward called a prior—soon made the monks feel his heavy yoke. Bitter were the complaints they made concerning his conduct. On the death of the last abbot he obtained leave to farm the convent revenue, and, using the permission to serve his own ends, wrought much harm to the estates of the monastery, pulling down houses thereon, and carrying off the materials to his own manors, seizing horses and other monastic property. But the crying instance of his greed, one which the chroniclers have carefully and tremblingly noted, was his plunder of the magnificent minster. He scraped off the silver coating of a beam—worth 500 marks—most likely from a shrine in that goodly treasure-house!¹ It was little wonder that the indignant monks turned to Rome for aid against this devourer of their substance.²

Nor was this the only bishop who, from his fair palace in S. Michael's Churchyard, caused his neighbours of the priory to tremble for the safety of their possessions. Hugh of Nunant, a monk-hater, who vowed, it is said, that "if he had his own way he would strip every cowed head in England," was nominated to the

¹ Dugdale, *Monasticon* (1846), iii. 178.

² Beresford, *Diocesan Hist. Lichfield*, 54.

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see in 1188. He is variously described as a man of piety and eloquence or as one desperately wicked.¹ Politically he was a follower of Prince John, who, during his brother King Richard's imprisonment in Germany, was endeavouring to strengthen his own position by forming a rebel party in the Midlands. Nunant obtained licence to incorporate the prior's barony with his own episcopal one, and by his accusations so enraged the monks that they fell on him during a synod in the cathedral church, and broke his head with a crucifix. The bishop, indignant in his turn, applied to Longchamp, the absent's King's representative, for licence to punish the outrage. And he was allowed to expel the brethren, "contaminated," so he said, "with secular pollution," from the monastery, and appoint secular canons, who probably came from Lichfield, in their stead. Appeal was made to Rome, but the monks were now too impoverished to obtain a favourable hearing of their suit at the papal court. So they remained in exile for several years.

But the adversary's triumph was, after all, short-lived. In 1194 King Richard, ransomed from prison, returned to England, and the scheme of Prince John and Bishop Nunant fell to the ground. The latter was deposed from his bishopric, and the monks he had oppressed took heart of grace, and bethought them how they might return to their old home. The story goes how one of their number put an end to the brethren's exile by his intercession with the Pope. Although often forced to beg his bread, brother Thomas tarried long at Rome, and offered to each fresh occupant of S. Peter's chair the petition of the monks of Coventry. On one occasion his Holiness in an angry mood bade the monk withdraw, telling him that other petitions to the same purpose had been exhibited to Clement and Celestine, his predecessors, but rejected, and therefore his expectations were vain. Unto

¹ Beresford, *Diocesan Hist. Lichfield*, 78.

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which the monk, with bitter tears, replied: "Holy Father, my petition is just and altogether honest, and therefore my expectation is not vain; for I expect your death, as I have done your predecessors',¹ for there shall one succeed you who will hear my petition to purpose." Then said the Pope to the cardinals: "Hear ye not what this devil hath spoken?" And immediately turned to him and said: "Brother, by S. Peter, thou shalt not expect my death; thy petition is granted."¹ So the monks returned joyfully to their old home; but Hugh of Nunant, so the chroniclers tell us, died in remorse and torment of mind, deploring the injuries he had done to the Coventry brethren "with abundant sighs and tears," and praying that he might die in a frock of the order he had in life despised.

But grasping bishops were not the only enemies known to the monks. There was a long-standing feud between the brethren of Coventry and the canons of Lichfield, dating from the time when Stephen gave them, together with the canons of Chester, permission to elect the bishop of the diocese.² The monks frequently defeated their object by nominating a candidate of their order, usually the prior, whom the canons would in nowise be induced to accept. Appeals to Rome would follow; and the Pope, seizing the opportunity, would set aside previous nominations, and impose his own candidate upon the contending parties.

At the first election we hear of, the Coventry brethren were able to secure the bishopric for one of their order, the prior of Canterbury, in spite of the canons' protests and appeal to Rome. But when, after his enthronement at Coventry, bishop Durdent came to Lichfield, the canons barred the gates of their fortified close against

¹ Dugdale, *Warw.*, i. 161. Rather an improbable story. More likely after Nunant's fall the monks found some one to plead their cause with the King.

² Beresford, 69.

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him, and, in the face of the episcopal excommunication, denied him entrance. They also refused to enthrone Gerard la Pucelle, elected by the sole voice of the monks in 1183. "Unica est sponsa mea, nec habeo duo cubicula,"¹ said the bishop in his discouragement. And this learned and righteous prelate died four months later, not without suspicion of poison. Nunant was appointed by the Crown; but on his death in 1199 the passions of the rivals, strengthened by political antagonism—for the canons were partizans of John while the monks clave to King Richard—again broke loose. On the nomination of Richard's candidate, one of the monks led off the *Te Deum*, as a signal that the proceedings were over, though the canons had taken no part in the election. "Who made thee cantor here?" cried the Archdeacon of Stafford, a member of John's party, in great wrath, for the cantor on these occasions conducted the singing. "I am cantor here, and not thou," was the reply, and as King Richard's party was then predominant the monks had their will.²

At the next election³ the brethren were brought face to face with King Richard's successor, and John found it a hard thing to subdue the Coventry monks, though he had at his back the entire company of the canons of Lichfield. When England was under an Interdict, the King sent to them the Abbots of Oseney and Waltham, proposing the Archdeacon of Stafford as a candidate for the vacant See of Coventry. But the monks would have none of him. They elected their prior, Joybert of Wenlock, and purposed to send the nomination oversea to the incoming archbishop, Stephen Langton. At Tewkesbury, John proposed the Abbot of Bindon. The monks refused utterly. "None whom I love wilt

¹ Which may be paraphrased: "I have but one diocese, and must I have but one cathedral?" (Beresford, 76).

² Cott. MS. quoted Dugdale, *Monasticon*, VI. iii. 1242.

³ *Ibid.* 1242-3.

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thou choose," cried the angry King. Then to the justiciar said the prior, afraid: "If it suits the lord king well, I will elect his chancellor." The chancellor was Walter de Grey, who was subsequently raised to the See of York. This proposal found no favour then, and the King appointed another meeting with the monks at Nottingham. On their return home they held a consultation in the chapter-house, and determined that they would elect neither of the King's candidates, Richard de Marisco nor the Abbot of Bindon. At Nottingham Castle Joybert and six monks besought the King that he would allow them to elect freely and canonically the prior or some other fitting man. Meanwhile all manner of threats and blandishments were used to make them give their voice for one of the royal nominees, but they held firm. Next morning, however, when the prior and two monks tarried long in the King's chamber, the four remaining brethren, fearing that their superior would at last give way, determined to go home and reserve their vote; but Fulk de Cantilupe shut the castle gate in their faces, vowing "by the tongue of God" that they should not leave ere they had made a bishop to the King's liking, "and other things he uttered," the record continues, "not meet to be said."

At last Prior Joybert began to waver, for the King promised him great rewards and honours if he would do his will, and urged him, saying: "Speak, prior, speak!" Then Joybert fell on his knees. "By the soul of thy father the King," he said, "and of thy brother the King, and by the honour of thy life, who art King, if it be not possible for us to have any other than one of these two, give us the Abbot of Bindon." "Never while I live shall this be," cried one of the monks, named Thomas, "and never shall he be my bishop." A bystander reproved him for this outburst towards his superior. "In the cloister I am but a monk," the fearless brother answered, "but here at the election of the

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bishop, I am the prior's fellow." Then John, looking about him in great anger left the room, and many nobles gathered about the monks, and urged them to fulfil the King's will. "Verily ye have much to fear," they said, "if you bring down his wrath upon your heads."

The unhappy monks were again summoned into the King's presence. "Lord prior," the tyrant began, "I have always loved thee, and thou wilt not do my will. What sayest thou to my chancellor, whose name thou didst propose to me at Tewkesbury?" The prior signified that he willingly accepted this candidate, and the King gave orders that the canons should be summoned to ratify the election. At this the smouldering jealousy between monks and canons burst into flame. "By S. Milburg," cried the prior, "they shall not come; never shall they be present at our election!" But John swore "by the tooth of God" that they should come in. "I would rather die," Joybert answered, "than be the cause of the destruction of my order." The nobles, who were present, gathered round the monks, and falling upon their necks entreated them to submit. Then the prior, vanquished, said: "Because nothing else is pleasing to you, and it is not possible to do other, do your will." A *Te Deum* was then sung by the company of monks and canons, although the former murmured greatly at the constraint laid upon them.

The case was afterwards laid before the papal legate, and the election of Walter de Gray annulled. The long dispute between monk and canon was temporarily allayed in 1227, when it was ordained that the election should take place alternately at Coventry and Lichfield, the prior having first voice and the dean second.¹ The quarrel gradually died away, and, well tutored by Pope and King, the electors peacefully met to choose the particular candidate designated by those in authority. Other quarrels brought the house low. In 1248 the

¹ Luard, *op cit.*, iii 104.

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resources of the convent had become so impoverished by law-suits concerning the Bishop of Coventry's right of visitation¹ that it was feared some of the monks would be compelled to disperse, a disaster the monks of Derley averted by receiving divers inmates of the Coventry Priory for a time into their hospitable house. When trouble again arose, the convent of S. Mary found that the enemy had sprung up under the very shadow of the monastery itself, and that the men of Coventry were even more implacable foes than the canons of Lichfield had been in times past. These quarrels between ecclesiastical bodies and their burgher tenants were of common occurrence in mediæval life. The strong corporate feeling which flourished amongst the monks, the zeal they bore for their order in general and their house in particular, which involved them in endless quarrels, caused them to play a notable part in municipal history. As a body they were opposed to the growth of free institutions among the townsfolk. They never rightly understood their tenants' desire for increase of municipal liberty, and feared by giving way to their demands to forego the rights of the Church, and bring their souls in peril thereby.²

¹ *Vict. County Hist.*, ii. 55.

² For the disputes between ecclesiastics and their tenants see Mrs Green, *Town Life*, i. 333-383 ; Thompson, *Municipal History*, *passim*. This feature is not confined to England. For the disputes between the men of Rouen and the chapter see Giry, *Établissements de Rouen*, 34.

CHAPTER III

The Chester Lordship

THE place where the monks settled was probably little better than a village. We may picture it as a couple of straggling streets intersecting one another, with small wooden houses on either side of the highway, which was comparatively empty of people except on market days when country folk would come in to sell their wares in the "Cheaping" at the monastery gates. Domesday records that there were only sixty-nine heads of families living in Godiva's estate at Coventry in 1086,¹ though Leicester and Warwick were fair-sized towns, as towns were accounted then. Of the two parish churches, existing probably at the Conquest, S. Michael's served maybe for the tenants of the lay lord, and Trinity for those of the ecclesiastical estate. For from the beginnings of its history the town had been divided into two lordships, whereof the convent held the northern part or Prior's-half, not mentioned in Domesday, as the gift of their founder, Earl Leofric; while the southern portion, the Earl's-half, which Leofric retained, became a part of the Earl of Chester's vast inheritance.

¹Reader, *Domesday for Warwickshire*, 9: "The countess held Coventry. There are 5 hides. The arable employs 20 ploughs, 3 are in the demesne, and 7 bondmen. There are 50 villeins, and 12 bordars, with 20 ploughs. A mill pays 3s. A wood 2 miles long and the same broad. In King Edward's time and afterwards it was worth 12 pounds, now 11 pounds by weight. These lands of the countess Godiva Nicholas holds to ferm of the king." See also *Vict. County Hist.*, i. 310.

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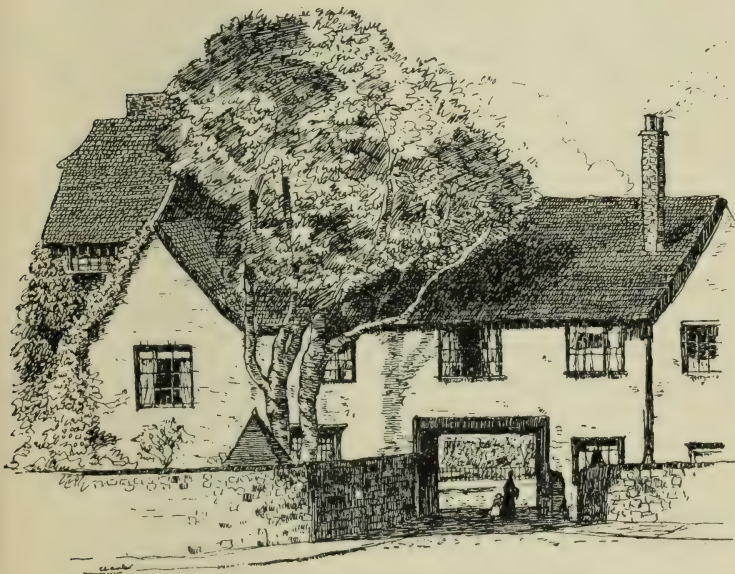
After the Conquest the convent retained their estate, receiving a gracious charter of confirmation from William, who, no doubt, was willing to link his name with that of his kinsman, the Confessor, as patron of this famed foundation.¹ The Earl's-half, however, passed to other masters. Probably Godiva held it during her lifetime; but at her death the Conqueror took it, as the lady's grandchildren and direct heirs were, as rebels, naturally shut out from the inheritance. How it was that the estate passed into the hands of Ranulf Meschines, Earl of Chester, we can only conjecture. He had probably deserved well at the King's hand and had his reward. Though not, it is true, so disturbing an element in the burghers' lives as his continental brethren, an English feudal lord had much power for good or evil over his dependents. His castle—with its fortifications, often breaking into the line of the city wall, as Rougement did at Exeter, or the Tower, built by the Conqueror to overawe the men of London—was a perpetual menace to the citizens. His officers or deputies could annoy and terrify the tenants in various ways. Thus one Simon le Maudit, who held in farm the reeveship of Leicester, went on to collect gravel-pennies, which he said were due to the lord from the townsfolk, long after these payments had been remitted by charter. But this document having been destroyed by fire, the burghers had no evidence wherewith to support their claim, and Simon "the Accursed" had his will.² Instances of feudal oppression seem, however, to have been comparatively rare, though warlike lords by involving their tenants in their quarrels frequently brought trouble upon them.

¹ Add MS. Ch. 11, 205. Leofric's gifts of lands, etc., with "sac and soc, toll and team," are therein confirmed to Leofwine, the abbot, and the brethren "sicut . . . Edwardus, cognatus meus, melius et plenius eisdem concessit."

² Bateson, *Rec. Leicester*, 42.

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Earl Ranulf came of a strong race. The founder of the family—whom the Welsh called Hugh “the Fat” by reason of his great girth, but the Normans “the Wolf” by reason of his fierceness—held manors of the Conqueror in twenty shires of England. Lord of the county palatine of Chester, the special privileges granted to him for the purpose of strengthening his hand against the Welsh made him almost independent of royal



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authority.¹ Meschines himself is an obscure figure, but the fame of his successor, Ranulf Gernons, whose doings were accounted terrible even in Stephen's time, when every man's hand was against his fellow, spread far and wide. In 1143 Coventry became the battle-ground of this earl and Marmion of Tamworth, King Stephen's ally. That was an evil time for the monks, as Marmion seized and fortified the priory, and for the townsfolk, as

¹ Ormerod, *Cheshire*, i. 10.

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they were between Marmion and Ranulf, the hammer and the anvil. The Tamworth lord died early in the struggle, for falling into one of the trenches he had made to enclose the monastery, he was killed by a common soldier. No doubt the monks reminded one another that their sacrilegious oppressor, who so justly came to this evil end, was of an impious stock. Did not his ancestor, one Robert Marmion, expel the nuns of Polesworth from their dwelling, until, warned in a vision by S. Edith, their foundress, and sorely smitten by the staff of the saint, he repented and caused the sisterhood to return? ¹

Ranulf lived on to find a reverse of fortune at Coventry. Four years after the fight with Marmion, the earl, finding the King's forces were possessed of the castle there, laid siege to the stronghold, but Stephen appearing, Ranulf's army was put to flight. It was a fitting end to this lawless life that he should die by poison and excommunicate; and his widow gave to Walter, Bishop of Coventry, under whose curse her husband lay, the hamlet of Stivichall, so that his soul might have peace.²

There was trouble also in the days of Earl Hugh, Ranulf's successor. He joined in the great feudal rising of 1173, when all England was a scene of strange confusion, and only the energy and promptitude of Henry II. and a few faithful followers saved the King's throne. Henry's sons were arrayed against him, supported by the arch-enemy, the King of France, the Scotch, the Flemings, and many nobles both in England and Normandy, whose power and lawless ways the King had sought continually to restrain. Such were the Earls Ferrars, Bigod of Norfolk, Robert of Leicester, and Hugh. The men of Coventry lent the Earl of

¹ Dugale, *Warw.*, ii. 1107. The incident is commemorated in a modern window in Tamworth church.

² Ormerod, i. 20-6. Dugdale, *Warw.*, i. 137

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Chester aid in this rebellion, as the men of Leicester did to their lord, Robert Blanchmains, for those tenants who held land by military service were bound to follow their feudal superior to battle. But one by one the King's enemies were defeated. Earl Hugh was taken prisoner at the siege of Dol in Brittany quite early in the struggle, and suffered a short imprisonment in the Castle of Falaise.¹ Swift destruction—siege and fire—came upon Leicester for the share the townsfolk had taken in this rebellion, and the inhabitants for a time forsook the place.² Coventry, as a place of less note, suffered less; but what liberties the townsmen possessed were confiscated, not to be redeemed until after Hugh's death, eight years later, by a payment of twenty marks. The men of Norwich had also cause to regret the part they took in the celebrated rising, but it was Bigod who dealt them their punishment, burning the city out of revenge because his men had declared for the King's party.

The men of Coventry had, it is true, one reason to dwell with gratitude on the memory of Earl Hugh. Dugdale tells us that among this lord's following was a leper. And it may have been for the sake of this man that Hugh built the lazar-house and chapel of S. Mary Magdelene at Spon in the fields on the western side of the city.³ All traces of this chapel have now disappeared, but the name Chapel Fields still serves to commemorate the place, with which the chapel of S. James and S. Christopher,⁴ whereof there are remains in Spon Street, is sometimes—but quite erroneously—identified. Leprosy, brought from the East by the Crusades, took terrible hold on the people of western Europe, and few towns of any note in those days were without their lazar-houses or hospitals for these sorely afflicted folk. The chief of these leper hospitals was at Burton Lazars

¹ Ormerod, i. 26.

² Thompson, *Hist. Leicester*, 42.

³ Dugdale, *Warw.*, i. 197.

⁴ See Dormer Harris, *Troughton Sketches*, 24.

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in Leicestershire, but the one that is best remembered nowadays is that of S. Giles, once "in the Fields," now in the heart of London.

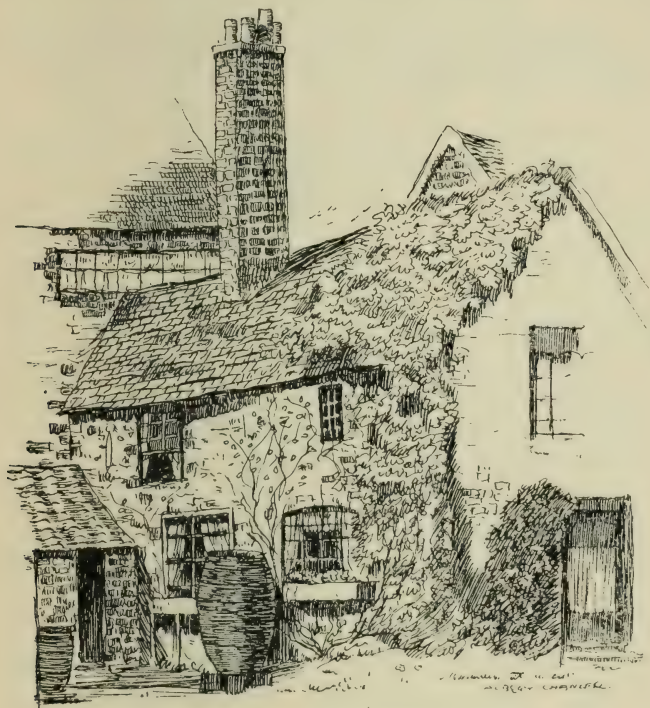
The most famous among the Earls of Chester was Ranulf, surnamed Blondvil, who succeeded to the earldom on Hugh's death. This befell in 1181. Ranulf was the last of the old order, the race of the feudal barons of the Conquest, who, by reason of their vast estates and almost princely power, were a constant source of anxiety to the kings of England. Men sang songs of Earl Ranulf,¹ either of his loyalty to his master John, or of his feats in warring with the Welsh at home or the heathen abroad, for he joined the Crusades, and was present in 1219 at the siege of Damietta. He was as much of a popular hero as Robin Hood during the fourteenth century. The Church knew him as the benefactor of the monastic house of Pulton, whence he removed the monks, its inhabitants, to Dieulacres in Staffordshire. And his pious deeds availed to save him after death, people said, in spite of many offences. For at the time of his dying, a solitary man at Wallingford saw a company of demons hurrying past, and learnt from one of them that they were hastening to the earl's death-bed to accuse him of his sins. Adjured to return within thirty days, the demon came back and told the hermit what had befallen. "We brought it about," he said, "that Ranulf for his ill deeds was adjudged to the pains of infernal fire; but the mastiffs of Dieulacres, and many others with them, without stinting barked so that they filled our habitation with a loud clamour whilst he was with us; wherefore our prince, disgusted, ordered

¹ *Piers Ploughman*, Passus v. l. 402. Sloth (a personification of one of the Seven Deadly Sins) says:—

"I can nought perfitly my pater-noster . . .
But I can rymes of Robyn hood, and Randolf, erle of Chestre."
It is more likely this earl is meant than his grandfather Gernons.

The Chester Lordship

to be expelled from our territories him who now proved so grievous an enemy to us.”¹ In this manner was the earl’s soul delivered from the evil place. In 1232 he died childless, and his vast lands were divided among his sisters and their issue. The Earl’s-half of Coventry fell to the lot of Hugh of Albany, and then passed to



GABLE OF CHEYLESMORE MANOR HOUSE

his daughter Cicily, wife of Roger de Montalt. This family continued to hold it until the days of Edward III., when by some arrangement with Queen Isabel, the King’s mother, it was vested in the royal line, ultimately becoming part of the duchy of Cornwall, heritage of successive princes of Wales.

¹ Hales, *Percy Folio*, i. 264-73.

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The only relic of the associations of the earls of Chester's family with Coventry lie in the Cheylesmore manor house, to the south-east of the city. The house itself is mostly modern, but there are fragments of ancient buildings—a chimney-shaft—incorporated with it. It is most likely that the Black Prince, who gave—say the annals—the ostrich feathers to Coventry, and prince Henry, afterwards Henry V., sojourned in the ancient dwelling at Cheylesmore.

CHAPTER IV

Beginnings of Municipal Government

BUT how did the men live who inhabited Coventry, who were neither warriors nor monks, but the rank and file of the townsfolk, the mere tillers of the ground and retailers of food and clothing, farmers, bakers, butchers, shoemakers, weavers, and the like? These men owed fealty, according to the position of the land they held, either to the prior or the Earl of Chester. It is with the earl's burghers that the main part of our story lies. It was they who won, after many checks and struggles, such liberties of trading and self-rule as helped to make their city rich and famous in after days. For wherever townspeople found that their lord, whether he were a noble or the King himself, had need of their money or support, they bargained with him for a charter, a duly written and attested document giving them the power to exercise certain rights, such as the collecting of their own taxes or the managing of their own courts, without the interference of his officials. Just as the barons of England gained Magna Charta from John in his need and weakness, or forced Edward I. to confirm the same ere they would give him money to prosecute his wars, so the townsfolk played out the same play in their own much humbler theatre, and drove their bargain with this or that great owner of estates.

For towns on the royal demesne the question resolved itself into one of mere traffic. Was the town rich

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enough to induce the King to grant a charter to the inhabitants conferring on them the liberties of which they stood in need? If so, the money was paid, and the town started on its career of independence. Nobles, too, were often willing to forego their manorial privileges for the sake of a substantial sum of money. But with churchmen and religious corporations the case was different. They were unwilling, under any circumstances, to part with the rights of the Church, "for fear," as the Coventry monks said, "of blemishing their consciences." In growing and prosperous communities, where men suffered by the restrictions laid upon their trade or persons, the attitude of the religious community, which stood to them in place of feudal lord, gave rise to great bitterness of feeling among the tenants. Discontent was in many cases the precursor of riot and bloodshed, showing how fierce was the spirit of resistance among these men, and with what tenacity they clung to the idea of freedom.

The condition of the men of S. Alban's, or those of any town where the inhabitants were serfs, was often miserable, or at best precarious.¹ A serf must perform for his lord frequent and often unlimited service. His offences were punished in his lord's courts of justice. He could not sell or depart from his holding or marry his children without licence. He must grind his corn at his lord's mill, and bake his loaves at his lord's oven.

But from these most oppressive burdens the Coventry men were free. They had in ancient custom a guarantee that their lord could not urge such claims upon them, for they held of him "in free burgage"; that is to say, they were quit of all personal service, and merely paid a money rent for house and land. They

¹ For a list of the manorial services required of villein tenants see Maitland, *Select Pleas in Manorial Courts* (Selden Soc., i.), 102-4.

² Green, *Town Life*, i. 197-8

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were not compelled to leave their business to carry in the crops on the lord's demesne, or follow him for a great distance to war, or bake at his oven, a custom the men of Melton observed until the days of James I.¹ Still, although they were not entirely at the mercy of their feudal superior, the men of Coventry had, as yet, no voice in the town government. They owed obedience to three powers—the Earl of Chester, the King, and the Prior of Coventry. For any fault or misdemeanour they were summoned to appear at the earl's castle, where the constable fixed their punishment, and the fine they paid passed into the earl's hand. The author of any grave or serious crime was answerable to the sheriff, the King's officer. While the prior, the lord of the soil in the Cross Cheaping, regulated all matters connected with the traffic of the market.

The townsfolk were neither rich nor strong enough to free themselves from the sheriff's jurisdiction, or their trade from the prior's surveillance. But in the reign of Henry II. they struck a bargain with Ranulf Blondvil, Earl of Chester, a great founder of towns, whereby they obtained certain rights and privileges, and some measure of self-government. In his charter the earl granted to his burgesses of Coventry the same customs as those enjoyed by the men of Lincoln, for it was usual for townsfolk to ask that their constitution might be modelled on that of some freer or more important place.² Lincoln,³ in common with most of the larger towns in England, borrowed certain customs from London, and Coventry, in its turn, was to

¹ Green, *op. cit.*, i. 199. The Preston men bargained that they should not be required to follow their lord on a warlike expedition lasting more than one day (*Ibid*).

² For Henry II.'s charter to Lincoln see Stubbs, *Select Charters*, 166.

³ See Gross, *Gild Merchant*, i. 244-257; Bateson, "Laws of Breteuil," *Eng. Hist. Rev.*, xvi.; Tait, *Mediæval Manchester*, 43-4.

The Story of Coventry

serve as model to other towns later in acquiring freedom.¹

The Earl's charter, a model of the exquisite penmanship of the twelfth century, runs thus :—

“Ranulf, Earl of Chester, to all his barons, constables, bailiffs, servants, men and friends, French and English, present and future, greeting. Know ye, that I have given to my burghers of Coventry, and confirmed in this my charter,² all things which are written in the same. Namely, that the said burghers and their heirs may hold well, honourably, and undisturbed, and in free burgage of me and of my heirs as they held in my father's time or my other predecessors', better, more firmly and freely. I grant them the free and good laws that the burgesses of Lincoln have better and more freely. I . . . forbid my constable to bring them into my castle to plead in any cause; but they may freely have their portmote, in which all pleas pertaining unto me and unto them may be justly treated of. Moreover, they may choose for me one whom they will among themselves, who may be judge under me and over them; who, knowing the laws and customs, may keep these in my council reasonably in all things, every excuse put away, and may faithfully perform unto me that which is due. And if by chance any one fall into my amercement, then he shall be reasonably amerced by my bailiff and the faithful burghers of the court. And whatever merchants they draw thither for the bettering of the

¹ Nottingham and Winchester received a grant of particular customs after the pattern of Coventry. London was taken as a model by Norwich. See Hudson, *Rec. Norwich*, i. 12.

² Dugdale assigns this charter to Blondvil, and I see no reason to differ. If Blondvil were the grantor, then the date would lie between the years 1181, that of Earl Hugh's death, and 1189, the date of the death of Henry II., who confirmed it. I am inclined to think that the charter should be assigned to 1181-2, in which year the men of Coventry paid 20 marks to the king.

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town, I command that they have peace, and that no one do them an injury or unjustly sue them at law. If, indeed, any stranger merchant do anything unfitting in the town, that shall be amended before the aforesaid justice in the portmote without a suit-at-law. These being witnesses . . . Robert Steward de Mohaut . . . and many others."

We see from the terms of this charter that the Coventry folk had already acquired a certain status as free burghers. Now their liberties were enlarged by a grant of self-jurisdiction. A further grant from Henry II., appended to the confirmation of this charter, limited the fine due from the burghers to the earl for any fault to 12d.;¹ "but if by testimony of his neighbours he cannot pay so much, by their advice it shall be settled as he is able to pay." We can call up a possible picture of the court of portmanmote, to which the charter refers. In some large open space, possibly S. Michael's churchyard, the townsfolk might be seen gathered together for the meetings of the court. Conspicuous among the little group of townsmen would be the bailiff, the earl's representative, a man whose yea and nay was very powerful among the lord's tenants, for was he not there to watch over the interests of his master, and arrange for the payment of fines and forfeitures which were his master's due?² By his side some fuller, weaver, baker, or prosperous agriculturalist would probably take his seat³ as the justice, the elected representative of the townsfolk. A clerk would also

¹ Corp. MS. B. 2. The charter is dated "apud Merlebergam" = Marlborough. This charter was first printed by the late Mary Bateson in "Laws of Breteuil," *Eng. Hist. Rev.*, xvi, 98-9.

² The townsfolk had not yet power to commute the fines and forfeitures for a fixed sum, called fee-ferm.

³ For the association of the feudal lord's representative and the chosen official of the townsfolk in a town court see the case of Totnes (Green, *Town Life*, i. 252).

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be present, for from the time of Henry III. court records were strictly kept and enrolled. Probably not all the townsmen attended each meeting, but only such of them as were concerned in any suit, and even these—within reasonable limits—might plead *essoyn*e, or a valid excuse for absence. What individual part was played by the justice and bailiff in the hearing of suits it is impossible to tell, but we may infer that the misdemeanours of the townfolk were made known to the court by a jury, drawn perhaps from every street or ward.¹ These men affirmed on their own knowledge, or on common report, that certain offences had been committed within the township. These offences were of a simple, trifling kind, those of a more serious nature being tried at higher tribunals, before the sheriff or the justices in eyre, or possibly in some other court of the Earl of Chester.² A presentment, for example, would be made to the effect that Nicholas, the son of William, had let his cows stray over the mowing-grass in a certain field which is in the earl's demesne, thereby causing damage to the extent of fourpence. Nicholas is at mercy,³ for it is well known that he is guilty, and he is thrown on the mercy of the court. Let him pay the damage, and twopence in addition for the fault.

¹ We infer from analogy that presentments were made by a jury in this court. Norwich was—for judicial purposes—divided into four leets. Each leet was divided into sub-leets, these latter divisions being composed of as many parishes as would furnish twelve tithings. The head-man, or “capital pledge” of every tithing—a band of ten, twelve, or more citizens responsible for one another—made the presentment of anything, which had happened in his tithing, which came under the cognizance of the court. See Hudson, *Leet Jurisdiction in Norwich* (Selden Soc., vol. v.), xii.-xxvi.

² It is not clear whether the townfolk at this period attended the earl's leet or the sheriff's court. They certainly attended the latter court in the time of Edward III. (Madox, *Firma Burgi*, 108-9).

³ *i.e.* has to be amerced, or fined.

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Or the jury say that Margaret, the wife of Anketil, took from the bakery of William of Stonelei two loaves, value one halfpenny, and afterwards defamed and struck Joan, William's wife, in the open street known as the Broadgate. And Margaret defends (denies) the deed: therefore it is adjudged that she come and make her law six-handed at the next court.¹ Or the jury declare that William, son of Guy, contrary to the assize of bread, whereby, if a quarter of wheat sell for 3s. 6d., the farthing loaf of wastel bread should weigh 42s., gives only 39s. weight of bread in the loaf, to the damage of his customers, the King's liege people.² Moreover, William was bidden at the last court to come and wage his law twelve-handed; this he has failed to do.³ Therefore he is at mercy. The fine is twelve pence. William cannot pay at once, but his pledges are John the Dyer and Thomas atte Gate.⁴

Such cases as these would be the everyday business of the local court; but civil matters also required a great deal of attention. Transfers of land were executed there, being witnessed by the principal suitors of the court. John the Smith, for example, would make over his house in Earl Street with all its appurtenances to Richard the Weaver and his heirs in return for an annual rent of fourpence, and would warrant it to him against all comers.

¹ *i.e.* appear with five of her neighbours, who swear that she is not guilty. This method of clearing the character by oath of the neighbours was called compurgation.

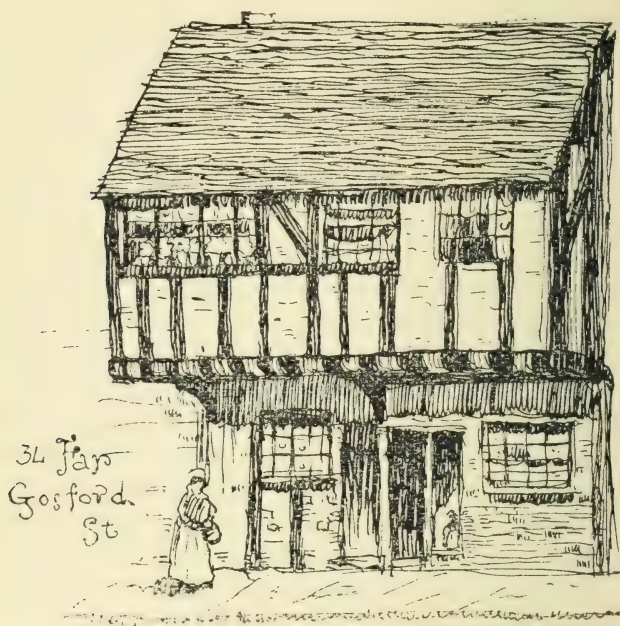
² Shillings and pence were used as weights. We still speak of "pennyweights" (Maitland).

³ Because no neighbours could be found to swear, therefore he is guilty.

⁴ Pledges or sureties for the fine. These cases are all imaginary, but drawn from analogous ones to be found in the Selden Society's publications, the *Nottingham Records*, etc. I am by no means sure that such cases as the last two would come within the purview of the portmanmote. On the difficult question of the line between manorial and regal jurisdiction see Hearnshaw, *Court Leet of Southampton*.

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Certain documents called indentures¹ would then be drawn up in duplicate by the clerk, the names of the chief of the folk present appearing therein as witnesses to the deed. To one of the indentures the grantor fixed his seal, to the other the grantee, each retaining the copy



to which the seal of the other party in the transaction was attached by way of title-deed.

At least twice a year the townsmen appeared before the sheriff,² at whose court criminal or "crown" pleas

¹ So called because the parchment on which the two deeds were written was so cut (indented) that they would exactly fit or dovetail into one another when put together at any future time. Hundreds of these documents are now at Coventry. See Section C of Mr J. C. Jeaffreson's catalogue of Corp. MSS.

² In cases where the lord of the manor was entitled to hold a leet or view of frankpledge, the tenants were exempt from attendance at the hundred court. In the "view of frank-

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received a hearing, and who, in his military capacity, overlooked the muster-at-arms of the townsmen, and fixed what number of archers were to be levied for the King's service. The proceeds of this court, goods of felons and the like, went to swell the royal treasury. The system of presenting criminals by means of a jury¹ obtained here as in the town court, but in doubtful or serious cases the accused would be condemned or acquitted not in accordance with evidence, but through an appeal to the interposition of Providence by means of trial by ordeal or battle. Thus, a man who was thrown into the water was, if he sank, pronounced innocent, if he swam, guilty; or the one of two champions, who overcame the other in fight, was held to have proved his case. But these irrational methods of trial were falling rapidly into disfavour. The "ordeal" was forbidden at the Lateran Council of 1216, and the Saxons, who much disliked the Norman method of trial by battle, always sought in their local charters to win exemption from the necessity of having recourse to it. Step by step the modern jury system was introduced, which, whatever may be its faults, is the most workable method hitherto discovered of obtaining a more or less unbiassed verdict in any suit.

Another provision of the charter, as confirmed by Henry II., was possibly an expedient to remedy the disasters which had lately befallen the townsmen under Gernons and Hugh. It was necessary, if the town was to grow and prosper, to attract settlers from different parts, and to those seeking a home in Coventry the clause that "newcomers should be free from all [payments] for two years after they began to build" would be most welcome.² From this time no doubt the advent

pledge" each testified that they were enrolled in a tithing or body of mutually responsible persons.

¹ The direct ancestor of our modern Grand Jury.

² The conditions under which strangers were admitted into a town differed with the particular locality. A free craftsman

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of passing or abiding strangers was not infrequent, and the place began to put on the appearance of a thriving



OLD WHITEFRIARS' MONASTERY, NOW COVENTRY UNION

little thoroughfare town. The grant of a fair to the Earl's-men in 1217, and one to the prior some ten years would be admitted to citizenship by purchase. If a serf escaped from his master's estate, and lived unclaimed for a year and a day, he was as a general rule permitted to continue in the town. In Lincoln it was necessary that he should pay the town taxes during that period (Stubbs, *Select Charters*, 159).

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later, brought stranger merchants within the town-gates.¹ The place was important enough to attract the Greyfriars thither before 1234, and the spire of their church still recalls their presence. More than a hundred years later came the Whitefriars or Carmelites, whose magnificent cloister is now incorporated in the work-house. A colony of Jews also found shelter in Coventry before the days of Edward I.² We know no more than the names, and now and then the occupations of the men of the place in the thirteenth century; for our inquiries among the land-transfers of the time can elicit nothing save the records of the sale of a tenement and curtilage by a William de Artungworth, "le drapier," or their purchase by Richard le Tailleur, hosier, or Richard de Mora, merchant. But even this bare enumeration of trades and callings show the advance made by the men of Coventry since the time when a handful of villeins and bondsmen tilled the lands that had been Godiva's at the taking of the Domesday Survey.

¹ Dugdale, *Warw.*, i. 161.

² Cole, *Documents Illustrative of Eng. Hist.*, 309-19.

CHAPTER V

Prior's-half and Earl's-half

[N Coventry we now enter upon a period where the townsmen not only sought to make good the privileges they had already won, but strove to gain, either by fair means or foul, such fresh concessions as they deemed necessary for their comfort and prosperity. The story of the struggle for liberty in English towns, though little known, is one of great interest. Though the whole thing is on a small scale, yet the narrative of events is no less stirring than the account of the revolt of a great nation. There was as fierce a conflict at S. Alban's among a score or two of men in 1327 as among tens of thousands in Paris at the Revolution. Few leaders of forlorn hopes have shown more desperate courage than the good folk of Dunstable, who were ready to brave not only the terrors of punishment in this world, but in the world to come, for, being cursed with bell, book, and candle by the bishop and their prior, they said that they recked nothing of this excommunication, but were resolved rather "to descend into hell altogether" than submit to the prior's extortions. And conceiving that they were likely to be worsted in the quarrel, they covenanted with a neighbouring lord for forty acres of land, preparing to leave their houses and live in tents ere they would pay the arbitrary tolls and taxes the prior had laid upon them.¹ It is true there were no philosophic fervour about the mediæval burgher, no en-

¹ "Prior Richard and Monks" in *Cornh. Mag.*, vi. 840.

Prior's-half and Earl's-half

thusiasm about liberty in the abstract. What he wanted was some small practical advantage his masters denied him.¹ All the townsman of S. Alban's asked at the beginning of the quarrel was, that he should be allowed to grind his corn at home instead of at the abbot's mill. But wanting this strongly and sorely, and seeing a chance of victory, he was willing to fight for it perhaps to the death.

The struggle for freedom is, in Coventry, at first interwoven with an old quarrel existing between the tenants of the two lords who held the town between them : for we have seen that Coventry was divided into two lordships ; on the one hand lay the property of the earls of Chester, the Earl's-half ; on the other the Prior's-half, or the convent estate. The government of these two manors was absolutely distinct. The Prior's-men had no lot or part in the privileges conferred in Ranulf's charter, and the Earl's-men none in those the convent won from Henry III. The customs practised by the Earl's-men on one side of the street, and those followed by the prior's tenants on the other, might differ to a considerable extent. They attended different courts ; some were compelled to pay dues from which their neighbours were exempt ; the prior's tenants might be forced to carry their lord's harvest, or work on his estate ; while the Earl's-men, as free burghers, had long since discontinued feudal labour. A priory tenant would stand in his lord's pillory, or hang on his gallows ; an Earl's-man met his punishment at the castle, or the sheriff's court. While the convent tenants could very likely bring their butter, horse provender, or coarse cloth to sell in the market free of toll, another owing the earl fealty might have to pay a penny or more before his stall could be set up in the market-place. These differences of tenure, custom, and privilege, naturally bred disputes among the townsfolk, a frequent

¹ Thomson, *Municipal History*.

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occurrence in those places wherein different lords held sway, dividing the allegiance of the inhabitants.

There appears to have been some ill-feeling arising from a trading jealousy between Earl's-folk and Prior's-

folk. The former were disposed, as early as the days of Henry II., to entertain some grudge with regard to the ordering of the market in the Prior's-half,¹ but we know no particulars of the grievance. So hotly, however, did the quarrel rage between them, that there were "debates, contentions, namelie killing of divers



men,"² in the streets. Doubtless, in the interests of peace, it was better that one or other of the contending parties should become predominant within the town, and force the other to consent to a compromise. The last Earl of Chester being dead, and his successors, the De Montalts, men of little mark, the chance lay with S. Mary's convent; and an enterprising prior, William of Brightwalton, was not slow to avail himself of the opportunity. Hoping, so the convent folk afterwards declared, to allay the strife by uniting the two manors whereof the town was composed under one lord, he proposed to purchase the earl's estate, a scheme to which Roger de Montalt, being

¹ Earl Hugh forbade his tenants to meddle with the prior's markets (Dugdale, *Warw.*, i. 159).

² Burton MS. f. 109a.

Prior's-half and Earl's-half

in need of money for a Crusade, was fain to agree. So in 1249 the latter resigned the manor into the prior's hand in return for a yearly rent of £100, with ten marks to the nuns of Polesworth, and by this means the head of the convent became lord of the Earl's-half,¹ Prior's-men and Earl's-men alike holding of him house and land, and owing him rent and accustomed services. Thus the lay lords of this great family slip out of the city's history; the ruling power in the town is the great religious corporation which owed its existence to Saxon piety.

Whatever changes this transfer may have brought about, one thing is certain, it did not establish peace in Coventry. Twenty years later the old jealousy flamed up anew. About 1267 both townsmen and convent took advantage of Henry III.'s necessities to negotiate for a charter, but with a different result. The former obtained a bare confirmation of their ancient liberties,² the prior, on the other hand, owing, belike, to his superior command of the purse, or in return for help he may have rendered the King in the late wars, was able to purchase fresh concessions for himself and his men. He was allowed to appoint coroners for the town, and further, licence was given to form a merchant guild among his tenants.³ The grant of these graces brought about an outbreak in the Earl's-half. Hitherto, it may be supposed, Earl's-folk and Prior's-folk had carried on their trade on fairly equal terms, but the new charter would bring about a revolution. The object of the formation of a merchant guild was to confine the trade of the district to its members; they would become local commercial monopolists. No wonder the Earl's-men resisted the foundation of this society. If it were once established, and they were excluded from its ranks, what a blow would be dealt to their prosperity.

¹ Dugdale, i. 138.

² Quoted in *Inspeximus*, 17 Ed. II. (Corp. MS. B. 4); the date there given is Jan. 30, 52 H. III. (1268).

³ Dugdale, *Warw.*, i. 162.

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The guildsmen would make it impossible for them to trade under anything like favourable conditions. They might be mulcted by tolls; subjected to the annoying supervision of the guild officials in respect to the weight or quality of their goods; restrictions affecting the time, place, or manner of their selling might be imposed on them; or they might have to relinquish bargains they had closed in favour of the members of the guild merchant.

So when the terms of this new charter were known the Earl's-folk rose in tumult, withstood the priory coroner when he attempted to see the body of a man, slain, no doubt, in these brawls, and prevented their neighbours in the Convent-half from forming the guild according to the permission vouchsafed to them. Nor could the sheriff's officer, sent by the royal order at the prior's request to proclaim these charters and liberties in Coventry, bring the unruly townspeople to obedience. "Certain men, we learn," ran the King's writ, "from those parts with others, armed with force, took Gilbert, clerk to the said sheriff, sent thither to this end, and imprisoned him, and broke" the royal "rolls and charters, and beat and ill-treated the men of the prior and convent."¹ What was the end of the tumult, or the fate of the luckless clerk, we cannot tell, but, as we hear no more of the prior's guild, it seems that this outbreak of the Coventry men "with others" prevented its establishment.

We now enter upon a fresh phase of the quarrel. It is no longer the Prior's-men but the prior himself who is the Earl's-men's enemy. Their whole energy is

¹ Merewether and Stephens, *Hist. Boroughs*, i. 469. The transcript of the MS. is given in Gross, *Gild Merchant*, ii. 365. The expression "with others" is very significant; these were probably men from the country, who had hitherto been allowed to trade in the town, and feared the establishment of the guild.

Prior's-half and Earl's-half

absorbed in the effort to free their trade from the restrictions the present lord of the Earl's-half has laid down for them to observe. For the Earl's-men appeared ill-content with the change of masters. Did the prior encroach upon the rights of the townsfolk? Probably not; previously established customs founded on the charter of Ranulf would bar his claims. But though the law may not alter, the interpretation of it may vary from time to time; so may the circumstances under which it is administered. It was so with the customs which had hitherto regulated the Earl's-men's lives. They and their present masters were disposed to differ as to the meaning these could bear, and hence a way was opened for numerous quarrels and lawsuits. Moreover, restraints, which had been borne without complaint in early days under the Chester lordship, were found unendurable when the townsfolk's commerce, and with it their desire for freedom, had increased.

The matter of the merchant guild was only the forerunner of more serious trouble. The townspeople were rapidly growing rich, whether by soap-making,¹ or the manufacture of woollen cloth, or the entertainment of travellers, or a happy combination of all three sources of wealth. Under Edward I. they were able to pave their city,² which had now risen to a sufficiently important position to be accounted a borough, and to return two members to the Parliament of 1295.³ Its prosperity attracted the notice of Edward I., who in 1303 summoned two Coventry merchants to attend a council;⁴ and of Edward II., who asked the inhabitants for a loan of 500 marks for the prosecution of the Scotch war. It is small

¹ Soap was made in the neighbourhood of Coventry about 1300. "Sope about Couentre." Robert of Gloucester, *Chron.*, i. 143.

² Dugdale, *Warw.*, i. 138.

³ *Parl. Writs*, i. lii.

⁴ Lawrence de Shepey summoned to attend a council of merchants at York in 1303 (*Ibid.* i. 135). He had been burgess for Coventry in 1300.

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wonder if the townsfolk were jealous lest this growing prosperity should be checked by the petty regulations the prior chose to lay on them. Was their wealth to be curtailed because, forsooth, the convent officials charged them, not to sell here, or make there, to relinquish a favourable bargain, or never to open stall or shop for sale of goods during certain hours of the day?

The prior in the days of Edward II. was Henry Irreys, and his hand lay heavy on the townsmen. They were not able to live, they complained, "by reason of his oppression." Moreover, like the jolly, illiterate Abbot of S. Alban's named Hugh, who "feared nothing so much as the Latin tongue,"¹ and so oppressed his tenants, Prior Irreys was an ally of Edward II., for it was by "maintenance of the King and of Spencer, Earl of Winchester" (*i.e.* Despenser), that he was enabled to keep the malcontents in check. In his days arose a second dispute concerning traffic, but at what date we cannot tell. The Friday market had always been held in the Prior's-half, and there only were the Earl's-men permitted to sell their wares on that day.² Now certain of them broke through the prior's order, and sold openly in their own houses³ during market hours. Appeal was made to the law. In vain the townsmen pleaded that by virtue of the clause in Ranulf's charter, giving them the same liberties as the Lincoln folk, they were free to sell their goods when or where they would. Vainly, too, they tried to strengthen their case by declaring that before the prior had purchased the Chester estate they had been wont to hold a fair in the Earl Street, where now their shops stood. These pleas availed nothing, and a verdict

¹ Froude, *Short Studies*, iii. 54. Edward II.'s overthrow was the signal for a rising against this abbot.

² Dugdale, *Warw.*, i. 162.

³ It is probable that there were no shops, in our sense, in the fourteenth century. The traders' goods were kept in a cellar below the ground floor (Turner, *Domestic Architecture*, iii. 36). See also, Dormer Harris, *Troughton Sketches*, 53.

Prior's-half and Earl's-half

was returned for the prior with £60 damages, the Earl's men being forbidden to sell anywhere but in the Prior's-half during market hours. The prescribed payment must have well-nigh ruined William Grauntpee and other traders concerned in the struggle, for £60 was then accounted a great sum.¹

It was in 1323 that the townsfolk sought, after a very novel fashion, to rid themselves of their oppressors. Their enemies accused them, whether truly or untruly we cannot tell, of having recourse to the black art, and strange rumours were afloat concerning the unlawful dealings of the citizens with one Master John de Nottingham, limb of Satan and necromancer, who inhabited a ruinous house in the neighbourhood of the town. Witchcraft was not then considered an ecclesiastical offence, but one against the common law, and it was, it seems, before the Court of King's Bench that the approver, Robert le Mareshall, told his story. He had been living, he said, with one Master John de Nottingham, necromancer, of Coventry. To whom, on the Wednesday next before the feast of S. Nicholas, in the seventeenth year of the King's reign, came certain men of the town, citizens of good standing, and promised them great profit—to the necromancer, £20, and “his subsistence in any religious house in England,”² and to Robert le Mareshall, £15—if they would compass the lives of the King and others by necromancy. Having received part of the promised payment as earnest at the hands of John le Redclerk, hosier, and John, son of

¹ The value of £60 would represent more than £700 at the present time. In the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries the average price of an ox was 13s. 1½d.; of a sheep, 1s. 5d.; of a cow, 9s. 5d.; and a fowl, 1d. (Rogers, *Agriculture and Prices*, i. 361-3).

² Probably a corrody or daily allowance of food from the monastic table during the life of an individual. This ensured for the individual who held it a share in the prayers of the brethren, and sometimes included lodging within the monastery.

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Hugh de Merington, apprentice of the law, with seven pounds of wax and two yards of canvas, the magicians began their work. On the Sunday after the feast of S. Nicholas they fashioned seven magical images in the respective likenesses of Edward II., with his crown, the elder and younger Despenser, Prior Henry, Nicholas Crumpe, his steward, the cellarer of the convent, and Richard Sowe, probably one of the priory underlings who had made himself unpopular. As far as the last-named enemy upon the list was concerned—for upon him they chose to experiment “to see what might be done with the rest”—they were entirely successful. On the Friday before the feast of the Holy Rood about midnight John de Nottingham gave his helper, Robert le Mareshall, a leaden bodkin, with command to thrust it into the forehead of the figure of Richard Sowe. The effect was wellnigh instantaneous. When the necromancer sent Robert on the morrow to inquire how Richard did, the messenger found him crying “Harrow,” and mad as mad could be. And on the Wednesday before the Ascension, John having on the previous Sunday removed the bodkin from the forehead of the figure and thrust it into its heart, Richard Sowe died.¹

Meanwhile the necromancer and the accused gave themselves up in court, consenting to plead before a jury. All, save the necromancer, were admitted to bail.² He no doubt looked to receive no mercy, and when after sundry delays the trial came on, the marshal certified that Master John de Nottingham was dead. Another of the accused, Piers Baroun, who had been a burgess at the Parliament of 1305,³ died also during the interval.

¹ Lansd. MS. 290, f. 533. It is the earliest trial for witchcraft extant in England. See also *Parl. Writs*, ii. Div. 2, App. 269-70.

² Divers natives of Warwickshire and citizens of London went bail for them.

³ *Parl. Writs*, i. ii.

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Others had fled from justice, though of these one Richard Grauntpee, without doubt a near relative of the man who had lost his suit with the prior in the matter of the market, afterwards came and surrendered himself in court. Either the sympathy of the neighbourhood was with the accused, or it was thought that Robert's tale was unworthy of belief, for a jury taken from the neighbourhood returned a verdict of acquittal. But the trial greatly embittered the feelings of the citizens, and when the tide turned, and they were able to do the prior hurt, they availed themselves of the opportunity gladly.

CHAPTER VI

The Seigniorship of the Prior and Queen Isabella

HITHERTO it had fared ill with the Earl's-men in their struggle with the convent. Were they to be worsted like the men of S. Alban's or Bury S. Edmund's? The former were now utterly broken in spirit. After a hard fight lasting from the days of Henry III., they obtained in 1327 a charter, conferring on them the control over the local courts and the privileges of a free and independent borough. And yet they were powerless. Five years later they voluntarily surrendered their charter into the abbot's hands. They gave up the perambulation of their borough. They took their handmills—the initial cause of the contention—and left them in the churchyard in token of renunciation. They presented to the abbot the town chest with the keys belonging thereto, thus relinquishing all their rights as a free and independent community. Nor did better success attend the Bury S. Edmund's men, who had the same high hopes as the S. Alban's folk, and who in the same year compelled their abbot to concede to them a guild merchant, a community, a common seal, and the custody of their gates. Five years later they too were forced to abandon these claims, and, after a fruitless effort at the time of the Peasant Revolt in 1381,¹ both

¹ Thompson, *Municipal History*, 22 sqq. Green, *Town Life*, i. 298.

The Seignior of the Prior

towns sank into apathy, each under the rule of the great local religious house.

But alone among convent towns, a piece of supreme good fortune awaited Coventry. The townsmen, just at a critical time, gained a powerful champion. In 1327, by some bargain between Isabella, widow of Edward II. and the representatives of the Chester family, the rents coming from the Earl's-half passed into the Queen's hands, to become after her death parcel of the duchy of Cornwall, heritage of the princes of Wales. We have nothing to do with the rights and wrongs of the quarrel which raged for twenty years between the Queen and the prior of S. Mary's convent. The undoubted gainers in this conflict were the men of Coventry; for, helpless under Isabella's repeated attacks, the monks conceded to their tenants those rights of self-government whereof they had stood in need so long.

Soon after the Queen's entry into possession of the De Montalt estate, the prior had many bitter complaints to make of the treatment he received at her hands and at the hands of his "mortal enemies," the men of Coventry. His courts were deserted by the men of the Earl's-half, the profits of his franchise finding their way, no doubt, into the Queen's coffers, as her steward held a court at Cheylesmore. His dues, waifs, heriots, the mournful enumeration proceeds, were withheld, and certain tenements belonging to him seized into "my lady's hand" in spite of charters shown to prove his ample right to the same. Great destruction had been wrought in his woods at Whitmore under colour of the Queen's claim to gather her "estovers," or fuel, therein. And the boundaries about these woods had been violently thrown down, and if "they be not now enclosed to prevent cattle from pasturing therein, they will be ruined for ever past recovery." The men of the Earl's-half lived in the prior's tenements in the Earl's Orchard, detaining the rent, twenty marks a year, "by tort and

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force.” But this was not the worst. By cover “of the Seigneurie of my said lady,” the prior continued, a great part of the rents in Coventry were treacherously withheld, and the monks dared not take distress and force the defaulters to pay “for peril of death.” For when their bailiff, Simon Pakeman, went to demand the aforesaid rents without making any distraint for the same, “up came Peter de Stoke and other mad folk . . . and assaulted the said Simon with force of arms, and beat and maltreated him, saying . . . that if the said prior and convent ever made any demand of the kind in the Earl’s-half they would make their heads fly” (*ferryent voler les testes*).¹ Again and again the prior and convent poured forth their monotonous complaint. Now they “prayed restitution” for the rent of two messuages, “which for two years last past my lady had given to a demoiselle of her chamber.”² Now they averred that she had put the bailiff of the Earl’s-half out of his office, whereby they had lost all profits arising from their franchises. Still the spoliation continued; they fixed the damage the convent had sustained at £20,000,³ and, turning from the deaf ears of Queen Isabel, besought the King to see justice done for God’s sake, “and for love of our Lady, his dear Mother, in whose honour the priory” had been founded, lest the convent should be compelled to disperse.⁴

Meanwhile the men of Coventry were gaining every year important graces from Edward III. Now that the power of the prior was thus diminished, there was

¹ Burton MS. f. 88. This appears to be the sense, but this portion of the document is missing from Burton’s folio. I found it on a loose leaf in the *Lect Book*, copied in Norman French in a modern and rather illegible hand from the deeds which were in the Stanton collection of papers destroyed in the Birmingham library fire. [It is now in Burton’s Book Corp. MS. A. 34.]

² *Ib.*, f. 110a.

³ Burton MS. f. 63a. An incredible sum.

⁴ *Ib.*, ff. 109-12.

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no one to prevent the acquisition of fresh liberties, and their money circulated freely at Westminster, the messengers bringing back in return the precious slips of parchment sealed with the King's seal, the testimony of new rights to be enjoyed by the townsfolk. In 1334 their merchandise was freed from toll in all places throughout the King's dominions.¹ Six years later licence was given them to form a merchant guild,² while other kindred societies sprang up, and received licence to hold land in mortmain.³ In 1341 the King granted a charter to the effect that any inquisition of lands or tenements within the city should be taken by the townsmen, and not by strangers, an important provision at a time when there were frequent lawsuits between the Queen and the prior.⁴

The convent give a graphic description of the effect of such an inquisition upon their holding, and of the plot between the Queen and the Earl's-men which caused the inquiry to be made.⁵ "There came the Men of the Earl's-half of Coventry amongst others . . . Conspiring and Compassing the undoing of the said prior and of his monks, and the Disinheritance and Destruction of their Church, and making show of their Intent unto my said Lady that her Seigniorie was more largely than she had occupied. . . . Whereupon the Stewards and some of the officers of my said Lady, without having any Power or Commission from the Court of our Lord the King,

¹ Corp. MS. B. 7.

² *Ib.*, 6.

³ These were S. John the Baptist, S. Catherine, the Corpus Christi, and the Trinity guilds, founded respectively in 1342, 1343, and 1364.

⁴ *Inspeximus*, 15 Ed. III. (Corp. MS. B. 7). This would be highly important in a trial taking place at the county court, where the sheriff might impanel a jury, not of townsmen, but of those in the country round, who would not be acquainted with the "metes and bounds" dividing the two estates. The Prior of Dunstable was accused by the burgesses of introducing foreign jurors into the town (*Cornh. Mag.*, vi. 837).

⁵ Burton MS. f. 110a.

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took an Inquisition of the said Men, Adversarys to the said Prior and Convent, what were the Bounds in Ancient times of the Seigniorye of the Earl Rondulph . . . which men quickly and Maliciously gave up the said false verdict to the Damnation of their Souls, Saying that all the Prior's-half, which is of foundation of the Church, is two little leys (meadows), whereon the profits by year are not above 50s. . . . and did fasten stakes of Division to Separate the Seigniory of my said Lady from the Seigniory of the said Prior." What made this action so particularly galling was that it was the "Seigniory of the ffoundation" of their "Church" Isabel called in question, though they had held it, they declared, long time before the coming of the Conqueror, and before the Earls of Chester, whose representative the Queen was, had been heard of in England.

The prior's complaints availed nothing; the men of Coventry were in a sure way of victory, and in 1345 the city was incorporated by charter. Three years later one John Ward took his seat as first mayor of the city. The mayor, bailiffs, and community were henceforth to be responsible for the fee-ferm;¹ and power to hear and adjudge certain pleas, hitherto treated of in the county court, was given to the city officers. The prior and his brethren looked upon this as a last indignity. "They are become lords of the said prior, all whome beforetime were his tenants," and in consequence of the

¹ The fee-ferm rent, representing the King's rights over the fines, forfeitures, etc, taken from criminals, was fixed at £50 a year. The liberties granted to be summed up thus: (1) The townsmen may duly elect their own mayor and bailiffs. (2) They have cognizance of pleas, of trespasses, contracts, covenants, and all other business amongst themselves. (3) There is to be a seal for the recognition of debts. (4) Mayor and bailiffs to have profits of view of frankpledge with the court, to have control over the gaol, fair, market, etc., and in return a ferm of £50 to be paid to the Queen and her heirs (Corp. MS. B. 11).

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inquisition above mentioned, he and his brethren were now "entirely involved within the danger of the mayor and his bailiffs, for they had not a foot of land of their Seigniori" beyond the priory gates.¹

Wearied of a struggle which had lasted for twenty years, the litigants, the Queen, the prior, and the newly-made corporation allowed the dispute to be set at rest once and for all in 1355, and the "Indenture Tripartite" made between them took the form of a compromise. Each of the three parties agreed to restore or forego the exercise of certain rights, or at least to accept an equivalent. The prior gave up all claim to jurisdiction over the Earl's-men, and the Queen forgave him £10 of the yearly ferm owing to her, while the franchises he thus relinquished—the right of holding view of frankpledge or leet and other courts with the exercise of the coronership—Isabel bestowed on the mayor, bailiffs, and community. These in their turn agreed to indemnify the convent by a payment of £10 a year.

Other matter of contention was laid at rest. The prior's tenants were to be taxable with the Earl's-men, and to serve as mayors and bailiffs with their fellow-citizens. The restrictions on buying and selling, which had given rise to the lawsuit in the former reign, were wholly laid aside. "Any persons of whatsoever condition they be, [may] sell any manner of wares" in the Earl's part, "or buy at what day or time it shall please them, and they shall not be disturbed by the said prior and convent." And although the market was to continue to be held as of old in the Prior's-half, no toll was to be taken according to the ancient custom, except for horses, while all the regulations concerning sale and merchandise should henceforth "be at the ordinance of the mayor and community." The assize of bread, ale, and victuals was to be kept by the mayor; and though the prior was to have all the profits arising from the

¹ Burton MS. f. 111a.

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finer of offenders against the assize, the officers of the corporation could enter the convent half, and, in case the prior's officers neglected to punish fraudulent brewers and bakers, could levy fines upon these evil-doers and see justice done.

Various restitutions were made on the Queen's part, showing that she and her advisers were really intent on a peaceful solution of the difficulty. The advowson of chapels, chantries, and the like, which she had appropriated, were restored to the prior, who, in his turn, forgave all the delinquencies of the Earl's-men against himself.¹ The "Tripartite" was drawn up so clearly, and in so fair a spirit, that in essentials it was never afterwards called in question. Disputes arose between the convent and the townsmen in later days, it is true, but not concerning the all-important matters of trade and jurisdiction. Nevertheless, this compact put an end, once and for all, to the prior's dominion in Coventry. Henceforth in recounting the history of the place, we have little concern with the convent; our subject touches only upon the rule and fortunes of the mayor, bailiffs, and community of the city.

¹ Burton, MS. ff. 98-103.

CHAPTER VII

The Corporation and the Guilds

AFTER the Settlement of 1355 the figure of the head of the great religious house at Coventry fades into comparative insignificance, and all further quarrels between city and convent hardly rise above the level of petty squabbles of no historical moment. The prior is no longer lord of the place; he merely appears as host of the royal folk, kings, and kings' sons, representatives of the ancient line of the Earls of Chester, when they sojourn within the city. The rent of the Earl's-half¹ now swells the revenue of the Princes of Wales, hence the appellation "*Camera Principis*," or the prince's (Treasure) chamber, the familiar motto on the city arms.²

With the disappearance of earl and prior from the foreground of the picture there emerges another figure, the city merchant, type of a newly-enriched class, the future guide of the destinies of the place. Curiously enough, it is this man's work in stone that has best survived the test of time. What has become of the castle of Hugh and Ranulf? It has utterly disappeared; indeed, its very existence has been sometimes doubted; the name "*Broadgate*" alone recalls the entrance (*latam portam*) whereto reference is made in one of Earl Hugh's charters.³ Where is the priory

¹ See above, page 70.

² Cf. the expression "*queen's-chamber*" as applied to Bristol, where the ferm was paid to the queen-consort.

³ The "*Casteldich*" is mentioned Corp. MSS. C. 61.

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of Ireys and Brightwalton? Mean streets cover the site, and of the cathedral nought remains but a few bases of clustered shafts in Priory Row and a portion of the North-West tower converted into a dwelling-place. But the outline of S. Michael's spire¹ built by the people is still the wonder of Coventry, and the guild-hall of S. Mary with its glorious roof and window has behind it five hundred years of continuous civic life.

Coventry was now a free and independent corporate borough. The townsmen had power to elect their own officers, and hold their own courts, taking for the common use the profits of jurisdiction, so long as they paid into the royal exchequer the annual fee-ferm of £50 and the prior's ferm of £10. The leading men of the place, most likely the wealthy merchants and others, who had won the charter of liberties from Queen Isabel,² now set to work to reorganise courts, elect officials, in short to shape the whole administration to fall in with the new order of things.³ We know nothing of the manner in which this was done, and as so many of the early records have been lost we can give no account in many cases of the

¹ On the belfry as continental symbol of independence, see Round, *Commune of London*, 244.

² For instance, one of the twelve whose names are handed down in the mayor-lists as winners of the freedom of the city was Walter Whitweb. He was master of the guild merchant in 1353 (*Corp. MS. C. 148*). Four of the twelve served afterwards as mayor, some others as bailiffs of the city. We may note that the leading families under the prior still continue to take the foremost place after the incorporation. Thus to Lawrence de Shepey, member of Edward I.'s assembly of merchants (*Parl. Writs*, i. 135), and in 1300 member for the borough (*Ib.*, i. lii.), succeeded Jordan de Shepey whose name is yet commemorated in Jordan Well, second mayor of the city and first master of the guild merchant (*Gross*, ii. 49). A parallel case is shown in the Kelle family. Robert was burgess in 1298 (*Parl. Writs*, i. lii.), and Henry one of the founders of the Trinity guild in 1364, and four times mayor of the city.

³ On the solemn consultations thus involved in the case of Ipswich, see *Gross, Guild Merchant*, i. 23.

The Corporation and the Guilds

form of municipal rule chosen by the citizens. Here and there curious documents give us a glimpse of the working of certain courts, or the municipal action of this or that body of men. But the information concerning very important points is unfortunately lacking. We are referred, for instance, to the "old custom" of electing officials, but we do not know what the old custom was, and are hence left in ignorance of the manner in which the election was made.

What part the poorer folk—*menus gentz*—smaller craftsfolk, and working-people played in the struggle for liberty is dark to us, but we may infer from the analogy of other towns,¹ and from the subsequent history of Coventry, that they had but little effective power under the new constitution. The growth of oligarchy² in towns is a matter of much debate. How early the few in Coventry engrossed the governing power of which the whole community was—in theory at least—the source, it is impossible in our present state of knowledge to determine. We have testimony as early as 1450 of the great influence of the leading crafts, mercers, and drapers. The evidence—though not always so clear as we could wish—points to a gradual absorption of the conduct of affairs during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries by a small official class. In the end this clique succeeded so effectually in freeing itself from every device framed to ensure some regard for the popular will, that the charter of 1621 vested all power—and incidentally considerable official emolument—in a close select body "entirely independent of the rest of the community."³ How early the citizens became aware of the trend of

¹ On the troubles attending the grant of a charter to Norwich in 1380, where the commonalty were "very contrarious," see Hudson, *op. cit.*, I. liv. *sqq.*

² Bateson, *op. cit.*, II. lxvi.

³ Charter 17 Jas. I. On the corruption of the Coventry corporation, see *Munic. Corp. Report* (Coventry, 1835) 12; Webb, *Local Government*.

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affairs we know not, but it is, maybe, significant that that popular discontent began to manifest itself within a generation after the incorporation of the city. In the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries the commonalty set order at defiance, reviled the mayor in the guild hall, and sought occasion to break out in riot and tumult, while under the veil of religious societies, industrial combinations—akin to the modern strike—formed again and again, and were with difficulty suppressed.

After 1420, when the graphic chronicle contained in the *Leet Book*¹ begins to be available for our researches, a glimpse is given of a fully evolved constitution in working order. On January 25, the feast of the Conversion of S. Paul, the mayor, chamberlains, and wardens were annually elected, the permanent officials, the recorder, legal adviser of the corporation, and the coroner re-appointed, the justices of the peace selected, while the bailiffs, according to ancient custom, received nomination at the Michaelmas assembly of the court leet. The justices of the peace—with the exception of the recorder—served also as key-keepers of the chest containing the common treasure. The court of portmanmote, mentioned in Ranulf's charter, still survived under various names, and in it pleas for debt were tried by the presiding officers, the mayor, and bailiffs. At quarter sessions the mayor, recorder, and three other late mayors, justices of the peace, dealt with criminal offences, and it was, probably, the activity of these comparatively recently created officials,² that brought

¹ *Coventry Leet Book*, 1420-1555, edited for the Early English Text Society by the present writer; part i. 1907, part ii. 1908, part iii. 1909, part iv. in progress.

² The mayor, recorder, and four lawful men of the city are allowed to exercise all that appertains to the office of justice of the peace for labourers and artificers in the county of Warwick, *i.e.* fix the rate of wages (Charter 22 Rich. II, Burton MS. f. 253). For a trial of felons by the justices of the peace, see Sharp, *Antiq.*, 212.

The Corporation and the Guilds

about the degeneration of the leet or view of frankpledge, normally a court of justice for the trial of minor criminal offences, particularly evasions of the assize of bread and beer.¹ By the fifteenth century, the Coventry leet had retained little or nothing of its judicial functions, and merely survived as a court wherein by-laws, binding on the whole community, and grounded on petitions of grievances, received the sanction of the jurats of the leet. Another body, which also possessed legislative functions, was the mayor's council of forty-eight, later known as the common council. While it is from a small select body called the council-house, of which the mayor and aldermen appear to have been ex-officio members, that there sprang the close, corrupt corporation of later times.

There are certain officials whose elections or appointments are not entered in the regular municipal records, but who, nevertheless, had great weight in the councils of the city. Such were the aldermen, who first appear in 1477.² These officials discharged certain police duties in their respective wards and were of the inner council of the mayor. Under the charter of James I. they became permanent justices of the peace, and members of the corporation. While as justice of the peace, key-keeper, head of the electoral jury and jury of the leet, the master of the Trinity guild was one of the foremost figures among the municipal rulers. His connection, and that of his fellow, the master of the Corpus Christi guild, with the mayoralty was very close. Two years before entering office each mayor was master of the Corpus Christi, and two years after quitting it, master of the Trinity guild. The control they exercised over the revenues of the guilds, which were often put to municipal uses, gave these masters much power and authority with the magnates of the city. The guilds joined their funds with those of the wardens to pension

¹ Hearnshaw, *Leet Jurisdiction*, *passim*. ² *Leet Book*, 420.

The Story of Coventry

deserving townsfolk ¹ and pay the salary of the recorder.² Before 1384 the Trinity guild discharged the ferm of



COURTYARD, ST MARY'S HALL, COVENTRY

£10 due to the prior, receiving a share of common land to be held in severalty ³—that is separate from the

¹ *Lect Book*, 59

² *Ib.*, 681.

³ We learn in 1384 that the annual ferm of £10, due to the prior according to the terms of the Tripartite, was drawn

The Corporation and the Guilds

lands of the community—as compensation. Indeed, the guild officers were so clearly considered as officers of the corporation that when they, together with the city wardens and chamberlains, neglected to present their accounts at the annual audit¹ they were one and all brought to book by the leet, and ordered to remedy their neglect under pain of punishment.

The origin of societies known as guilds is involved in controversy, but they were common throughout all Europe in the Middle Ages, bearing eloquent testimony to the fortifying power of combination. They afforded mutual protection to their members, frequently making good any loss sustained from an insurance fund to which all were contributory, and devoting other portions of their revenues to feasts, almsgiving, and public works. Guilds are best remembered, however, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, as monopolist organisations, and a third of all the towns in England, with the possible exception of London, had their merchant guild, or body of traders and handicraftsmen, engrossing the local commerce to the exclusion of all men without their ranks. The craft guild was a century behind the merchant guild in its rise and development. Its members met together to make rules, by which all who practised a particular calling in the locality were to be directed in all affairs connected with their trade or handicraft. They devoted some of their revenue to religious uses, the members frequently supporting some church or chapel, or providing candles for altar or processional lights. Other local guilds not definitely from the coffers of the guild (*Leet Book*, 2-6). Directly the guild lands were confiscated in 1545 the corporation made a great outcry concerning their poverty. They had, they declared, no lands whence they might derive an income to meet the yearly ferm of £50, and in trying to discharge it one or two of the citizens were yearly ruined (*Vol. of Correspondence*, f. 63, *Corp. MS. A.* 79).

¹ *Leet Book*, 295.

commercial, but rather social, in character, often called after some saint, were active in the performance of all good works; they clad the poor in their livery, supported churches, colleges of priests and grammar schools, and pensioned decayed and deserving members. At Coventry, in the later fourteenth and earlier fifteenth centuries, guilds rose rapidly, and as rapidly coalesced, or, in the case of those "yeomen" or journeymen fraternities, which served to focus the prevailing industrial discontent, failed to maintain themselves in face of the hostility of other powerful previously existing associations. Two fraternities survived to play a great part in the city's mediæval history, the Corpus Christi guild, founded in 1348, and the better-known society of the Holy Trinity, S. Mary, S. John the Baptist, and S. Catharine, properly a fusion of four different fraternities, founded between 1340 and 1364, and known for brevity's sake as the Trinity guild.

It is possible that it was to the foundation of the merchant guild of S. Mary¹ in 1340, the kindred associations which sprang up around it, and to the gifts of their members in lands and money that the townsfolk owed the purchase of the incorporation charter.² It is frequently found that the same man serves in different years as mayor and master of the merchant fraternity.³

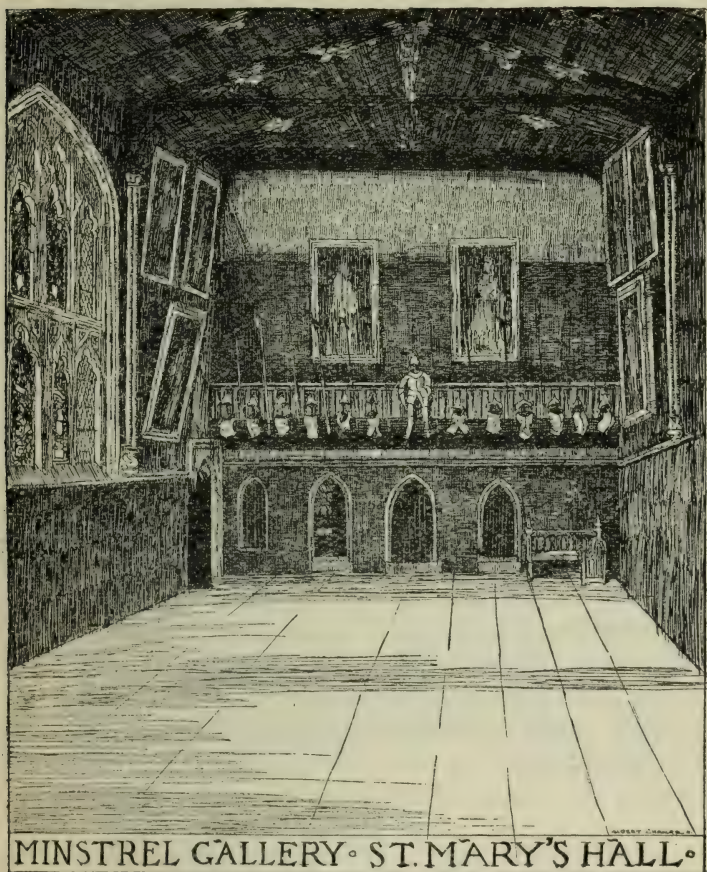
¹ Gross, *Gild Merchant*, ii. 49; Toulmin Smith, *Eng. Gilds*, 231. In the return of 1389 it is stated that several messuages worth £37, 12s. 4d. a year are waiting for the licence of the King and the mesne lords to be given to the guild. No doubt the Statute of Mortmain was often evaded. The corporation records show that the guild held house property as early as 1353 (Corp. MS. C. 148).

² The foundation of the guild has evidently a municipal reason, since the statute of 1335, by declaring that all merchants might traffic with whomsoever they would, and in what vendibles they chose, effectually did away with this monopoly of the merchant guild (Ashley, *Econ. Hist.*, i. pt. i. 84).

³ Many early mayors were masters of the guild merchant; the cases of Jordan de Shepey and Walter Whitweb have been

The Corporation and the Guilds

The town hall of S. Mary, in which not only the guild feasts were held, but municipal business¹ was transacted,



and the town chest, as well as the guild plate,² stored, tells by its name of its connection with S. Mary's

noted. In William Holm, master in 1356 (Corp. MS. C. 153), we have undoubtedly William Horn of the mayor-lists.

¹ Sharp, *Antiq.*, 211. The guild hall was used for municipal purposes as early as 1388.

² *Ib.*, 212.

The Story of Coventry

brotherhood. The vaulting of the entrance porch of this building still bears on its central boss a carving which represents the coronation of the Virgin; another of the porch carvings—now weather-worn—recalled the Annunciation, and a scene on the famous tapestry within the hall, the Assumption,¹ so that the guild brethren, could be everywhere reminded of the scenes in the life of their chief patroness. No church, however, recalls the Virgin's name, though materials from an unfinished building, which should have borne that dedication, were transported from Cheylesmore to Bablake, where the stately, early Perpendicular church of S. John the Baptist was rising on ground granted by Queen Isabel in 1342 to the fraternity called after that saint.² Both S. John the Baptist's guild and S. Catherine's—the latter connected with S. Catherine's chapel in S. John's Hospital,³ coalesced between 1364-5 with the guild merchant, to be absorbed later by the all-embracing Trinity fraternity. This fusion of the guilds, which had certainly taken place informally before 1384,⁴ was ratified by patent in 1392,⁵ when the united revenues were increased to the amount of £86, 13s. 4d. a year. The completion of S. John's church became the especial care of the Trinity guild, and the dues taken at the Drapery, where cloth was sold, were devoted to that purpose, while a college of priests, whose number was in 1393 increased to nine, officiated at this church, and lived on the bounty of the brotherhood.⁶

¹ In Mantes the guild "aux marchands" was one with the "confrérie de l'assomption de la Vierge" (Luchaire, *Communes Françaises*, 34).

² *Vict. County Hist*, ii. 120.

³ Sharp, *op. cit.*, 159.

⁴ *Leet Book*, 3.

⁵ *Rot. Pat.* 16, Ric. II., pt. i. m. 19. The guilds of S. Mary and S. John were united as early as 1362 (Corp. MS. C. 159). Sharp says that the union took place between 1365 and 1369 (*op. cit.*, 131); but in a deed executed in 1372 the guilds mentioned are SS. Mary, John the Baptist, and Catherine (Corp. MS. C. 165).

⁶ Sharp, *op. cit.*, 130-2.



SMITHFORD STREET

The Corporation and the Guilds

The priests of the merchant guild, as was meet, occupied from the beginning the most honourable place of all. They sang their "solemn antiphonies" in the lady-chapel of S. Michael's, the great parish church of the Earl's-half, a practice which was still continued after the title of the guild became merged in the society of the Trinity;¹ while the guild of the Corpus Christi, composed, it would seem, of the prior's tenants, occupied the corresponding chapel in the parish church of the Trinity.²

One guild, that of the fullers and tailors, called after the Nativity, carried on an obscure existence in connection with the since demolished chapel of S. George outside the Gosford gate. The formation of this society was violently opposed by the powers that were in 1384 on the ground that the purpose of its members—"labourers and artificers of the middling sort" and strangers—was to withstand the mayor and officers of the city, and not to promote the welfare of souls.³ After 1400, further guild-making had come to have little favour with the ruling men of the city. Three several times did the mayor and bailiffs obtain patents forbidding the formation of guilds other than those already existing within Coventry.⁴ While the close alliance of the older fraternities and the corporation is shown in the fact that the meetings of the guilds of S. Anne and S. George, formed by journeymen tailors in the first quarter of the century, were suppressed by royal command under the pretext that their meetings were to the manifest destruction of the ancient foundations, the guilds of Holy Trinity and Corpus Christi.⁵

¹ Sharp, *op. cit.*, 24-5.

² *Ib.*, 81.

³ See *Vict. County Hist. Warw.*, ii. 154-6

⁴ Corp. MS. B. 35. Letters patent against the formation of new guilds, dated Nov. 18, 8 Hen. IV. (1406), confirmed in 1414 and 1441 (B. 38 and 47). A great deal of confusion and wrong dating exists in the Hist. MSS. Com. Catalogue with regard to this point.

⁵ Corp. MS. B. 40 (1406); B. 41 (1414); B. 43 (1424).

CHAPTER VIII

The Mayor, Bailiffs, and Community

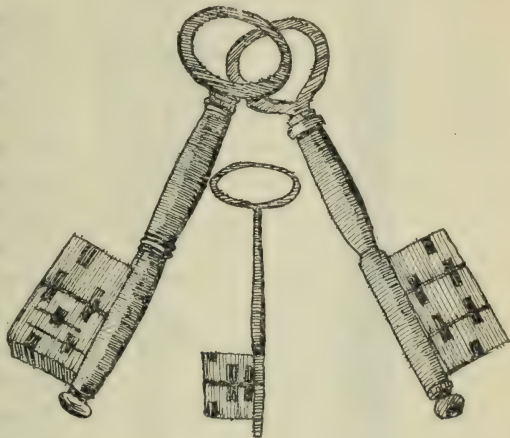
WE have seen that it was the stable and well-to-do classes which bore rule over their fellow-citizens. Men of substance, and they only, were eligible for office, and the terms "degree of a mayor," "degree of a bailiff," used in assessing fines, show that there was some strictness maintained with regard to this property qualification. And indeed it was needful that mayors, bailiffs and the like should be moneyed men, for their responsibilities were great and the turns of fortune curious, for should any source of revenue fail, they were compelled to make up the deficit, and hence were poorer men at the year's end than at the beginning. Thus when the prior refused to pay the murage tax for twenty years, the chamberlains, or treasurers, contributed the sum that was lacking from their own purses.¹ Still, on the whole, the magnates preferred to acquiesce in their election rather than pay £100, 100 marks, or £40 as a fine for refusing to fill the respective offices of mayor, sheriff or master of either guild. Once, indeed, a certain Roger a Lee declined to occupy the office of chamberlain, though he was a man well-to-do, having received £30 in money and plate with his wife, and must—so the prevailing opinion was—have "had right largely of his own," or else "John Pachet would not have married his daughter to him." When solemnly adjured to "come in and exercise the said office,"

¹ *Leet Book*, 597. They were afterwards reimbursed when the suit was decided against the prior.

The Mayor, Bailiffs, and Community

Roger persisted in his refusal, nor did the imposition of a fine of £20 avail to shake his resolution.¹

But having once accepted office, with all its emoluments, risk and toil, a citizen was forthwith raised to a platform, high above the mere "commoner," who had neither lot nor part in the rule of his city. He became one of the "men of worship," whom to insult was a dire offence;² and his doings must not be cavilled at, or explained to the vulgar herd. Gravity, decorum, and, above all things, secrecy³ marked the councils wherein he took part. Seemliness of behaviour was demanded from him; a late mayor must live cleanly, the leet decreed, and not give way after warning to "avowtre, fornicacion, or usure," if he wished to rise higher as master of the Trinity guild, or continue to meet his brethren at the council board.⁴



THE CITY KEYS

¹ *Leet Book*, 619.

² See Green, *Town Life*, ii. 256, for examples of the punishments of those who insulted officials. In Coventry two men—John Smith and John Duddesbury—for their ill-behaviour to "men of worship" were, in 1495, put under surety from session to session until their submission should content the justices of the peace (*Leet Book*, 569).

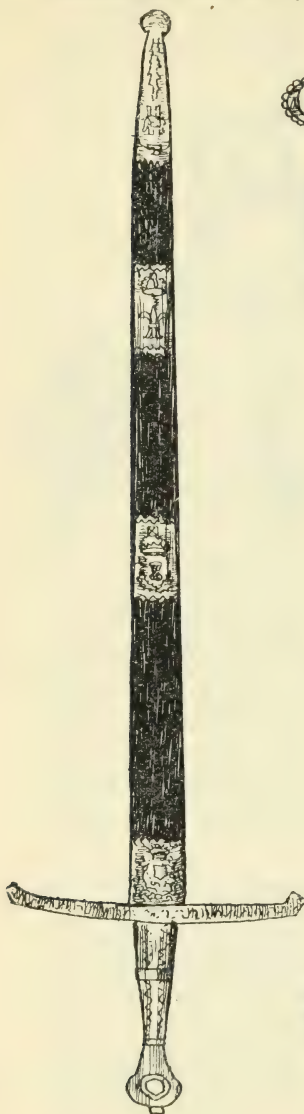
³ Six of the mayor's council met every Wednesday. The sergeant kept the council-house doors so that no unauthorised person might enter (*Ib.*, 516).

⁴ *Leet Book*, 544. The mayor was to be deprived of his "cloke" (*i.e.* official rank) and council, of which body he was an *ex-officio* member.

The Story of Coventry

Distinguished on great occasions by his official dress,

he was surrounded by an atmosphere of form and ceremony, which no doubt had its effect on the outside world. When the mayor went to mass every morning at "seven of the clock" the sword-bearer and officers attended him. A like procession was formed on the way back, for though the underlings might go about their business during service, they were commanded to "hearken" the time of the mayor's coming out of church so as to be ready to accompany him homewards.¹ So sensible were these worthy men of the dignity of their position, that questions of precedence were ever considered of great moment. When Harry Boteler, the recorder, fell into disgrace in 1484 by magnifying his office at the mayor's expense, the council thought it a due punishment that he should yield his place to the



THE SWORD



THE CITY MACE

¹ *Leet Book*, 662.

The Mayor, Bailiffs, and Community

master of the Trinity guild, who thenceforth went by the mayor's side in all municipal processions,¹ an order afterwards rescinded probably to gratify one of Boteler's successors; the mayor from that time walked alone, the master and recorder together.²

The labours of the town officials were greatly increased by the all-embracing character of the local legislation. The people of the Middle Ages believed devoutly in the efficacy of the law, and many matters concerning prices, wages, and the like, now known to regulate themselves according to supply and demand, were at times the subject of an infinite amount of often fruitless law-making. Nothing could check the zeal and energy of the local law-givers; no subject was too difficult for them to grapple with, none beneath their consideration. The worshipful men might reverse the whole organisation of the crafts connected with the iron industry at one leet sitting,³ or, on the other hand, turn their attention to the local supply of halfpenny pies, or the amount of wheat put by the families of the two parishes into the holy cake, or blessed bread, distributed to the congregation. No doubt it was impossible to enforce all these regulations. All the energy of the leet, or council, and the vigilance of the town officers often failed to do away with a long-standing abuse. It was forbidden, under penalty of £10, to throw refuse into the Sherbourne; yet though "great diligence" was made to learn who the offenders were, it did not hinder the commission of the offence.⁴ And although, according to the decrees of leet and council, people were compelled to be cleanly, honest and peaceable, I make no doubt that ducks⁵ and swine still appeared in the streets,⁶ bakers' loaves fell short of the proper weight,⁷

¹ *Leet Book*, 521. The recorder was the legal adviser of the corporation.

² *Ib.*, 642.

³ *Ib.*, 180.

⁴ *Ib.*, 455.

⁵ *Ib.*, 27.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ib.*, 24.

The Story of Coventry

and men of craft bore arms in the city, and wounded each other in quarrel.¹ In short, many regulations were mere paper regulations to the end of the chapter.

The mayor and his colleagues had no light work before them on taking office. Numberless details of municipal business went far to fill their days with employment. In addition to his judicial duties, a mayor examined, either in person or by deputy, a great part of the household stuff which came into the city to be sold. He must needs have some acquaintance with matters military, when a threat of invasion or civil war turned him into a captain, and the citizens under him into soldiers, such as they appeared at the half-yearly muster, each armed with such weapons as suited his degree.² While, in order to acquit himself with credit in the difficult and delicate relations wherein the citizens were frequently involved with the outside world of politics, a mediæval mayor must gather all the information he could upon affairs of state.

The bailiffs, with their work of court-holding, ferm-paying, and fine-collecting;³ the chamberlains, who overlooked the common pastures, and put the murage money to its proper use;⁴ the wardens, who supervised town property and made payment of sundry expenses, delivering up their accounts for the annual audit, were all deeply immersed in business. And the keeping of these accounts was no easy matter, so great a variety of items was included therein, and so frequent were the demands upon the public purse. Now the wardens would be called upon to entertain and reward the bearward of a neighbouring nobleman, or the groups of strolling players who set up their booth in the inn-yard

¹ *Leet Book*, 28.

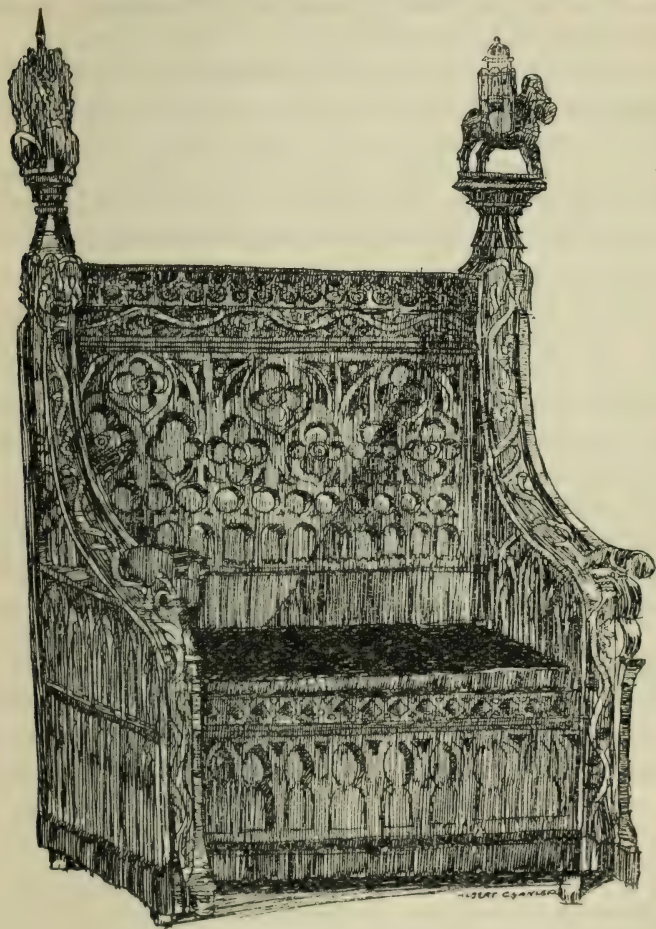
² Green, *Town Life*, i. 127.

³ The bailiffs by their oaths were compelled to pay all due ferms and fees, and to be present on court days and sessions of the peace (*Leet Book*, 224).

⁴ See the chamberlains' accounts (*Ib.*, 54-5).

The Mayor, Bailiffs, and Community

or market-place ; or, again, to contribute to the maintenance of the knights of the shire,¹ or lay down the ten pounds, which the mayor took as the “fee of the



THE OLD STATE CHAIR

cloak” ;² now to defray the cost of a civic banquet, or that of the mayor’s new fur cap, keeping in the latter

¹ *Leet Book*, 107. Knight’s fees to be paid by wardens, and not by chamberlains.

² *Ibid.*

The Story of Coventry

case, the “olde stuffe” for the use of the town.¹ Surely much of the activity of the House of Commons under Edward III. and the House of Lancaster is in the main due to the training many of its members received at home in the local guild-hall or council-house.

A great part of the municipal business in the Middle Ages was carried on by bodies consisting of twenty-four men, a double jury, a number occurring in London as early as 1205-6,² in Leicester in 1225,³ and rather later in Norwich.⁴ In Coventry in the fifteenth century twenty-four lay officials, frequently including the justices of the peace, brought together by some indirect process of which we have lost the secret, elected the officers for the ensuing year. The same number, and to all intents and purposes the same men, were the jurats of the leet. A council of twenty-four, chosen by the mayor and perhaps identical with the jury of the leet, examined petitions four days before the two great assemblies of this court, in order, it seems, to discuss and decide on their rejection or acceptance by the jury of the leet. Moreover, twenty-four nominees of the mayor reinforced the electoral jury of twenty-four to form the mayor's council of forty-eight.⁵ In practice, however, there was no rigid adherence to these numbers; small executive or deliberative bodies frequently met, and on occasions when it was deemed necessary large “halls” or assemblies of indeterminate numbers were summoned by the mayor to testify to the popular will. This calling together of the community, a relic maybe of immemorial custom,⁶

¹ *Leet Book*, 334. If the cap cost more than 13s. 4d., the surplus was to be paid by the mayor.

² Round, *Commune of London*, 237-8.

³ Bateson, *Rec. Leic.*, i. 34-5.

⁴ Hudson, *Norwich*, xxxv.

⁵ See below, p. 93.

⁶ Any business touching the public weal—such as the payment of a royal debt, granting away of town property and the like—could not be transacted without the official consent of the community. Thus in 1422, when the mayor summoned sixteen

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affording in its traces of ward¹ organisation evidence of a form of government older and more popular than the system employed by the town rulers in the fifteenth century, reveals a lack of any well-thought-out scheme to ensure the election of representatives. Hence it seems to have been of little avail for purposes of popular control. The members were summoned at the requisition of the mayor, and were frequently to a great extent members of the official class. Hence in the cases of which we have record they did nothing but set the seal of approval to the official policy. Thus in 1384² the mayor summoned four or six out of every ward to learn what the common wish was concerning the Podycroft and other common lands, which the Trinity guild kept in severalty in return for the annual ferm of £10 paid to the prior on behalf of the corporation, the assembly was in favour of the continuance of the old arrangement, though it was avowedly a most unpopular one. And no orders of leet availed to check the open discontent of the common folk, who certainly did not feel themselves in any way bound by this assembly. The guild constantly found that their fences were broken down, and their fields overrun by the people at Lammas; and in 1414³ it was thought necessary to decree that people trespassing (*delinquentes*) in the enclosures should be arrested, and imprisoned until they had made sufficient amends "by view of the guild master and six of the guild brethren."

of the magnates to weitness the sealing of deds relating to town property, "it was perceived by the mayor and all present that it would be more expedient . . . for the mayor to summon these following and many concitizens" (*Leet Book*, 40).

¹ Those who were summoned for purposes of consultation came according to their wards. Thus in 1384 it was determined that the mayor should summon four or six citizens out of every ward (*vico*), who should testify "tam pro seipsis quam pro tota communitate ville," what the general will was concerning the enclosure of certain meadows by the Trinity guild (*Ib.*, 5).

² *Leet Book*, 5.

³ *Ib.*, 20.

The Story of Coventry

But the discontent of the commonalty did not abate, and once more, in 1421, the officers in high place went through the form of consulting their fellow-townsmen. A hundred and thirty-four citizens, summoned at the mayor's requisition to S. Mary's Hall, gave the lie to popular discontent a second time, and approved of the giving over of the Mirefield, the Podycroft and Stivichall Hiron to the use of the guildsmen. But the anger of the townsmen became so hot that in the following year they destroyed certain gardens at Cheylesmore, which, it appears, had been enclosed by well-known townsmen, members of the mayor's council and justices of the peace.¹

The mayor's council of Forty-eight, one of the most important of the constitutional expedients ever devised by the ruling class at Coventry, met apparently for the first time in 1423. In the previous year, no doubt with the notion of allaying the prevailing discontent, the idea of selecting a definite number of commoners from every ward to form a council to watch over the interests of the commonweal first took shape. There had been "dissentious stirrings" concerning enclosures, and there is little doubt that at the Michaelmas leet there was some speech of giving those outside the corporation some means of checking the alleged malpractices of the municipal rulers. The mayor had been charged to call forty-eight commoners, divers out of every ward, to hear *the chamberlains' accounts* for three years past, and to witness any *grants made under the common seal*.² But there is

¹ The commons destroyed Julius (? Giles) Allesley's gardens without the Grey Friar Gate (Harl. MS. 6,388, f. 16). Giles Allesley was mayor in 1426. Attilboro, a member of the usual council of twenty-four, who took part in the election of the mayor (*Leet Book*, 22), and Southam, a justice of the peace (*Ib.*, 44), had gardens which encroached on the common lands, for which they were allowed, when the survey was taken, to pay a composition (*Ib.*, 50-1).

² *Leet Book*, 42. These grants were given to enable certain citizens to dispense with the ordinary regulations of leet;

The Mayor, Bailiffs, and Community

little or nothing to tell of the activity of this body of commoners.¹ On the other hand, at the first opportunity the corporation turned this idea of a council into a weapon for their own defence by providing at the election of the mayor in the following January that there should be one consisting of the staunchest supporters of the town rulers. "It was provided," the *Leet Book* says, "that the said mayor should call and take to him the same twenty-four worthy men, that were of his election, with other twenty-four wise and discreet men, chosen to them and named by the said mayor," and that this company should "put in rule all manner of good ordinances" for the benefit of the city.² And the worthy men were determined that this good ordaining should be followed by prompt obedience.

"It is and hath been accustomed," says an insertion in 1484 in the records of Leet, "that whatever the foresaid forty-eight persons ordaineth and establisheth for worship of mayoralty, bailiffs and commonalty of this city, according to the law, all the whole body of this city shall be bound thereby."³ A certain latitude was allowed to the mayor as to whom summons should be sent "when he had need of forty-eight persons," save that he was always warned to require the attendance of "sufficient" men,⁴ *i.e.* of suitable rank. After 1446 we find that the presence of a quorum of twelve persons was sufficient for the transaction of business, the whole body afterwards giving their assent to the measures ordained by this smaller company.⁵ And it was most probably probably much favour and affection were shown in the granting of them.

¹ We cannot tell whether this council even met. In 1423 we hear that the chamberlains' accounts were audited in the presence of the mayor and "48 honest and legal men" elected by the aforesaid mayor to hear the accounts (*Ib.*, 54). Query, were these the commoners, or the mayor's council of Forty-eight?

² *Leet Book*, 44.

³ *Ib.*, 520.

⁴ *Ib.*, 157.

⁵ *Ib.*, 228.

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this small working body that was the ancestor of the inner council of the mayor and aldermen, which ultimately, by the charter of James I., gained complete and unchecked control over the municipal affairs of Coventry. The rule of this council gradually became a veritable tyranny. Even the official class rebelled against its dictates. We hear of a majority, "the most part" of the council, and this includes the idea of a dissentient minority. Those who transgressed the commands of this majority, if they had never filled the sheriff's post, lost the freedom of the city; while late mayors or sheriffs lost their official rank. He shall "be exempt," the order ran¹ in the sheriff's case, "from wearing scarlet among his company in all common assemblies, feasts, and processions"; and further, to be punished with fine and imprisonment at the mayor and council's discretion; on a late mayor the same penalty was laid, with the addition that he should be "exempt from his cloke and council"; while any citizens "comforting the disobedient" were to suffer the same penalties. When we learn that this order was framed in 1516 for the correction of John Strong, late mayor and *ex officio* member of the council, we may form some conception of the tyranny of this body, whose doings even divided the corporation against itself.

¹ *Leet Book*, 647-8.

CHAPTER IX

Coventry and the Kingdom of England

SO far was Coventry from the great centres of the national life, that there is little to connect the place in the earlier parts of its history with the history of the kingdom.

William I. may have passed through on his way from Warwick to Nottingham on one of his journeys to crush the rebellious Saxons, and Stephen, as we have seen, swept down on the castle—that famous “castlelet or pile”¹ in Earl Street—and razed it to the ground. Other notable travellers came during this period to Coventry, but secretly, for they wished to escape pursuit. Many evil-doers claimed the protection of the Church in those days, and when any fugitive entered the sanctuary, he was safe from pursuit. There he made confession of his crime, and, if he left of his own free will, he must abjure the kingdom, and make straight for some port appointed him by the coroner, there to take ship for foreign lands. Many criminals on quitting the sanctuary found their enemies lying in wait, and perished, although they held the cross, symbol of the Church’s protection, in their hand. Men feared to incur the penalty of excommunication, which the violation of sanctuary always brought, by dragging Faulkes de Breauté

¹ This castle, afterwards rebuilt, fell into decay, and was let out into tenements. Cheylesmore, where the De Mohaut’s lived, had originally been a nursery for the Earl of Chester’s children (Stowe in Harl. MS. 539, No. 4: see also Corp. MS. C. 61).

from Coventry church; and this Norman adventurer, whom the favour of John and Henry III. had raised to riches and greatness until he was “*plasquam rex in Anglia*”—of more account than the King—put himself under the bishop’s protection, and travelled in his company to Bedford to throw himself on the King’s mercy. He was banished the kingdom. With him fell, in 1222, the foreign party under Peter des Roches, who for so many years had thwarted the designs of Henry’s great minister, Hubert de Burgh.

In other ways the reign of Henry III. was locally a memorable one. During the siege of Kenilworth, which lasted from midsummer to December 1266, the neighbourhood was the centre of military operations, but when the castle containing the remnant of De Montfort’s following surrendered, the smouldering fires of civil war died away. Part of the famous ruin that witnessed this siege, the Norman keep, or Cæsar’s Tower, is standing yet. But of all these events the local documents tell us nothing. In spite of the stirring scenes enacted at Kenilworth, scarce five miles away, we do not know whether the folk of the town took part with De Montfort or with the King.

The city has no associations with Edward I.,¹ but his son, who had strong partisans among the convent folk, appointed a levy to meet him at Coventry on February 28, 1322, before he went to fight with and defeat Lancaster at Boroughbridge.² Edward III. tarried in Coventry in 1327, the year Cheylesmore passed into Isabella’s hands. This queen is one of many women who bulk large in Coventry history. Her ears were always open to the complaints of the hard usage her tenants received from the prior, and messengers doubtless often travelled between Coventry and Castle Rising, in Norfolk, to bear news to the queen of her enemy’s

¹ The borough sent two members to the 1295 parliament, but remained unrepresented from 1315 to 1452.

² Stubb’s *Const. Hist.*, ii. 49.

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undoing. She also took the Grey Friars, who had become famous for their sanctity, under her protection, and a letter¹ from her, written at their request, begging that there might be no interference with their privileges of burial, is still extant. At that time many bodies of great folk, who "as Franciscans thought to pass disguised," were buried clothed in the habit of the order in the Grey Friars' chapel, bringing no small profit to that famous house. No doubt the Queen's protection of their rivals was another drop in the monks' cup of bitterness.

After Cheylesmore and the Earl's-half became a royal manor, kings and princes very frequently visited the city; for as Coventry had by this time become an important place—already accounted the fifth city in the kingdom—its wealth was an attraction to needy kings, who desired to be on good terms with burghers who were becoming a power in the land. It was this wealth which enabled the citizens to establish their position in the reign of Edward III. and his grandson by the purchase of fuller and yet fuller charters of liberty; but this wealth did not relieve the city from the agrarian and industrial unrest which makes memorable the reign of Richard II. At the time of the Peasant Revolt in 1381 John Ball was taken in hiding in an old house, says Froissart, in Coventry, where he had possibly a home or relatives.² The commonalty of the city had, maybe, given ear to his doctrines of equality and communism in former days, for there was at that time great suffering and discontent among the poorer folk. The artizans were oppressed not by their lord—as the men of S. Alban's or Bury S. Edmund's—but by their own fellow-townfolk, the rich merchants, who held high office in the corporation. Year after year there comes the same complaint. This or that mayor enclosed the common

¹ Sharp, *op. cit.*, 179.

² The name of Ball occurs in Coventry deeds. It is, of course, a common name.

pasture lands,¹ so that the people had not sufficient grass for their cattle, or refused to punish his brethren and allies the victuallers, who broke the assize of bread, so that the people were cheated of the barest necessities of life. The enraged artizans, who, in 1387, "cast loaves at the mayor's head because the bakers kept not the assize, neither did the mayor punish them according to his office," would no doubt listen gladly to the discourses of this old-time socialist. "Good people," he would say to the assembled multitude, "the maters gothe nat well to passe in Englande, nor shall nat do tyll every thyng be common. . . . We be all come fro one father and one mother, Adam and Eve; wherby can they (the gentlemen) say or shewe that they be gretter lordes than we be? . . . They dwell in fayre houses, and we have the payne and traveyle, raine and wynde in the feldes; and by that that cometh of our labours they kepe and maynteyne their estates. . . . Thus Jehan [Ball] sayd . . . and the people . . . wolde murmure one with another in the feldes and in the wayes as they went togyder, affermyng howe Jehan Ball sayd trouthe."² Change a word here and there, substitute "merchant" for "gentleman," and "in the workshops" for "in the fields," and you have a discourse which would have greatly enraged the men of Coventry at the time of the Peasant Revolt.

The murmur about another name greater than that of John Ball had also reached the citizens. Lutterworth is scarcely fifteen miles distant from Coventry, and if we may judge by the tale of subsequent troubles and persecutions, there were many followers of Wickliffe within the city.³ William

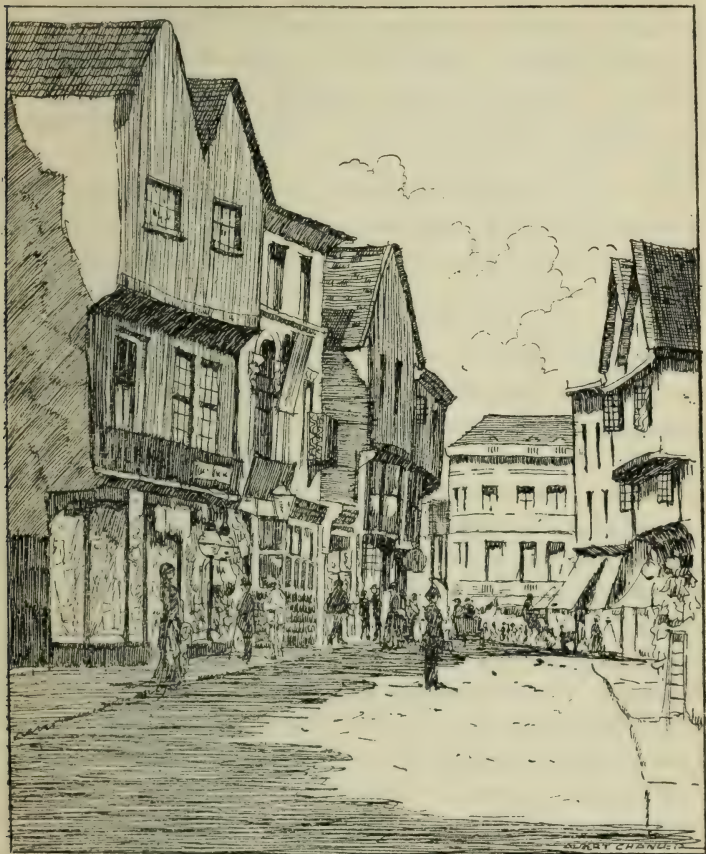
¹ On the Trinity guild enclosure of 1384, see *Leet Book*, 6; on the formation of the first of the defiant artizan guilds about this year, see above and *Vict. County Hist., Warw.*, ii. 154.

² Berners, *Froissart's Chron.* (1901) ii. 224.

³ Warwickshire may have been a county addicted to Lollardy. John Lacy, vicar of Chesterton, near Warwick

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Swynderby, who had preached to crowds in the Lollards' chapel at Leicester, being forsaken of his friends because



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he had recanted rather than face martyrdom, left that place and so came to Coventry in 1382.

There he tarried nearly a year, making many converts, but being forced by the clergy to depart, he vanished was charged with receiving and harbouring the famous Old-castle, Lord Cobham (*Diocesan Hist. Worcester*, 103).

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into the fastnesses of the forest beyond the Malvern Hills and there hid from his persecutors many years.¹

Nevertheless the Wickliffite tradition must have persisted after his departure, for in Oldcastle's day the city had become a centre for the issue of Lollard books.² Nicholas Hereford, collaborator in Wickliffe's version of the Bible, is also associated with Coventry, where—after 1417—he died.

His was a life of strange vicissitudes, for having endured imprisonment in a papal dungeon at Rome, and “grievous torment” in the archbishop's castle of Saltwood, Kent, he abandoned Lollardry, recanted at Paul's Cross, and rising to important position in the Church, learned to persecute those of his ancient faith. In later years he entered into the solitude and silence of the Carthusian monastery at Coventry and so vanished from our sight.³

The foundation-stone of the church of this very monastery had been laid in 1385, by that champion of orthodoxy, Richard, King of England, who, in the hearing of the mayor and other notables promised to be the founder thereof and bring the work to completion.⁴ After the Dissolution this house passed into the hands of the Lincoln family; the arms of Edward Clinton, Earl of Lincoln, are painted in one of the rooms of the still existing house. Part of the Prior's lodging remains, and in one room a portion of a large fresco of the Crucifixion reveals the figure of Christ from the knees downwards sprinkled with fleur-de-lys. Two years later Richard again visited the city what time Chief-Justice Tressilian, the “hanging judge” of the Peasants' Revolt, and the court of King's Bench,⁵ sat therein, and bestowed on the mayor the right to have the civic sword borne before him by an officer. The MS. Annals say that in 1384 the

¹ Trevelyan, *Age of Wycliffe*, 315; Knighton, *Chron.* ii. 198.

² *Eng. Hist. Rev.* xx. 447.

³ Trevelyan, *op. cit.*, 310; *Dict. Nat. Biog.*, s.v. “Hereford, Nicholas.” ⁴ *Vict. Coun. Hist.*, ii. 84. ⁵ Knighton, *Chron.* ii. 235.

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mayor, John Deister, had forfeited this right, and that the sword was borne behind him, "because he did not justice." The *Leet Book*, however, makes John Marton mayor in this year,¹ and indeed the Annals have come down to us in a state of sad corruption.

Maybe these frequent royal visits were not always welcome. A court of justice accompanied the King wherever he went, for the steward and marshal of the household had jurisdiction, superseding other authority of shire or borough, over an area of twelve miles to be counted from the King's lodging.² Before setting forth the steward gave notice to the sheriff of the place wherein the King proposed to sojourn, so that prisoners might be brought thither for trial at the household officers' court, a practice so little popular that rich and powerful towns purchased the chartered privilege, whereby the mayor became steward and marshal of the household. This right Coventry obtained in 1451. Kings, when they came to the city, were usually lodged at the Priory, though there was a quasi-royal residence, first occupied by the Mohauts, at Cheylesmore; but the vast retinue found shelter within the town. At the command of the marshal the doors of the principal folk of the place were marked with chalk, and the dwellers there found they had to accommodate some member of the royal party. There was a certain price to be paid for the advantages of situation as a great thoroughfare town between London and the north-west, and a manorial relationship to the Princes of Wales.

The most memorable sojourn of this vain, beautiful, decadent king, Richard II., within the city took place in 1397 when Coventry witnessed the preparations for the duel between Henry Bolingbroke and Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk. The splendour of royal and knightly accoutrements at this meeting must have dazzled the sober townsfolk, and perhaps they shared in the

¹ *Leet Book*, 3.

² Green, *op. cit.*, i. 209.

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bewilderment of the Court at the strange vacillation of the King, who, when all preparations were made, forbade the duel to take place. Holinshed¹ tells of the "sumptuous theater" on Gosford Green wherein the lists were made ready for the combat; and wherein too, after the combat had been stayed, the two adversaries sat two long hours waiting until the King's pleasure should be known. When sentence of banishment was pronounced and leave-takings over, "the duke of Norfolk departed sorrowfullie into Almanie, and at the last came to Venice, where he for thought and melancholie deceased"; for Harry Bolingbroke, however, whose sentence was not like his adversary's, for life, but for ten years, many active days remained. Gosford Green, where this scene was enacted, is still a green, and as yet unbuilt on. The ruins of Caludon Castle, where Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk, passed the night before the meditated encounter with Bolingbroke, are still visible from the highway leading from Stoke to Leicester, but of Baginton Castle, where his adversary slept, scarcely more than the foundations remain. Richard was lodged in a tower belonging to Sir William Bagot, about a quarter of a mile without the town. Sir William, who with Bushy and Greene acquired such unenviable notoriety as creatures of Richard II., lies buried in Baginton church, where a monumental brass of rare workmanship, now placed immediately under the rafters of the chancel roof, once marked the place where he was laid.

It is likely that Richard saw Coventry once again when, badly horsed and in unkingly array, in 1399 they brought him, a prisoner, on the way from Flint on the last journey to London.

It is fitting that in a city so unorthodox as Coventry the first attack should be made on the vast possessions of the Church. At the summoning of the "Unlearned Parliament" in 1404 a special precept was given to the

¹ Holinshed, iii. 494.

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sheriffs to prevent the return of those skilled in the law as members of parliament, and Coventry, remote as it was from the law-courts at Westminster, was a happy spot to choose for such an assembly. The respect the clergy had once commanded was now withheld from them by reason of the dissolute lives so many led, and their greed of wealth, whereto we find such abundant allusion in "Piers Plowman" and Chaucer's poems, and the proposal to appropriate the wealth of the Church to secular ends was well liked by the knights of the shire. Archbishop Arundel pleaded in response to this attack that the clergy gave tenths and the laity only fifteenths towards the King's necessities; moreover, the Church was not wanting day nor night in rendering the King service by masses and prayers to implore God's blessing upon him. Whereat Sir John Cheyne, the speaker of the Commons, with a stern countenance, said "that he valued not the prayers of the Church." But it was early days for such words as these. "It might easily be seen what would become of the kingdom," was the severe reply, "when devout addresses to God, wherewith His Divine Majesty was pleased, were set so light by." The work of Henry VIII. was not to be anticipated, and the knights desisted from the attempt at the threat of excommunication.¹

The town was witness at this time of an example of the lack of reverence for the mysteries of religion displayed by the people who were about the person of the King. Dysentery was very prevalent at Coventry during the session of parliament, and one day the archbishop of Canterbury encountered a procession bearing the Host through the streets to some sick man's bedside.² The

¹ Dugdale, *Warw.*, i. 142. The only reference to Coventry in the business of this parliament is a petition from the convent against the men of Coventry, who injured the conduit built by the people of the priory (Corp. MS. B. 34).

² Trokelowe and Blaneфорde, *Chron. S. Albani* (ed. Riley), 394.

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archbishop bent his knee, but the King's knights and esquires, not interrupting their conversation, turned their backs upon the Sacrament. The ecclesiastic was filled with holy indignation at such irreverence. "Never before was the like abomination beheld among Christian men," he cried, and went to complain of the offenders to the King. Henry was at first loth to punish his followers, but he was finally moved to do so by the prelate's eloquence, for the House of Lancaster in its weakness had allied itself with the Church, and looking to that body for support, the King was careful not to alienate so powerful a friend as the Archbishop of Canterbury.

The Lancastrian kings were, however, better known in the city as borrowers than as champions of the orthodox faith. Royal folk at that time, in spite of their great array and state, were often at a loss for ready money, and the treasury of Henry IV. was notoriously an empty one. Henry V. too, wanting money to prosecute his wars, in the third year of his reign borrowed 200 marks from the mayor and community, leaving in pledge "his great collar, called Iklynton collar,"¹ garnished with 4 rubies, 4 great sapphires, 32 great pearls, and 53 other pearls of a lesser sort, weighing $36\frac{3}{4}$ oz., and then valued at £500. When the King or any great noble desired to borrow, and the citizens were willing to lend, collectors were appointed by the corporation to go through each ward and take from every man his contribution towards the loan. Each citizen paid, according to his ability, a sum varying from 13s. 4d., taken from the most substantial people, to a penny from those of the poorest class. The extent of every one's property, more or less accurately gauged on these occasions, was a matter of common knowledge. Where there was so little privacy in life and such frequent assessments, neither wealth nor poverty could well be hid.

¹ *Leet Book*, 70. *Issue Roll of Exchequer*, H. III.-VI., 402.

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Did Shakespeare glean any legends of Prince Hal from Coventry sources? He must often have visited the city as a travelling player, and, since both the names of Shakespeare and Arden (or Arden) occur in the Coventry records, the poet may have had kinsfolk in the place. He brings the prince quite gratuitously thither, causing him to meet Falstaff followed by the famous ragged regiment on the high road leading to the city.¹ Falstaff was in his youth "page to Thomas Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk,"² who held Caludon Castle, a few miles from Coventry, and Peto, whom his master bade meet him at the towns-end, bears a Coventry name.³ It may be there is little or no contemporary evidence for the tale of Henry's wild doings, which Shakespeare localised at Gadshill and the "Boar's Head" tavern in Eastcheap, and it is more or less a matter of temperament or preconceived notions with historians whether, on weighing the testimony, they dismiss or accept familiar traditions of the prince's robbery of his own receivers,⁴ or assault on Judge Gascoigne.⁵ To the ordinary reader it seems as if there cannot have been such a vast deal of smoke without some little fire. The suspicion grows that Henry may well have passed a short time of idle apprenticeship before becoming a veritably industrious master.

There is a familiar Coventry variant of the Gascoigne

¹ Shakespeare I. *Hen.* IV. iv. 2.

² *Ib.*, iii. 2. See my letter in *Athenæum* 4330, p. 489.

³ Henry Peyto was mayor in 1423. The Peto family came from Chesterton.

⁴ Kingsford, *Early Biographies of Henry V.*, in *Eng. Hist. Rev.*, xxv. 78. Although Stow's *Chronicle*, where this story first occurs, was not published until 1570, the author relied on early authority ultimately derived, it seems, from the Earl of Ormond, who died 1452.

⁵ See Solly-Flood, "Henry V. and Judge Gascoigne," *Trans. R. Hist. Soc.*, iii. 49; Harcourt, "The Two Sir John Fastolfs," *Ib.* 3rd Ser. iv. 47; Kingsford, *Henry V.*, 80-93. The Gascoignes subsequently settled at Oversley, Warwickshire.

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story wherein the mayor, John Hornby, plays, as it were, the part of the Chief-Justice, since he, in 1412, say the City Annals or Mayor-lists—"arrested the Prince in the Priory [one MS. reads "city"] of Coventry." Unfortunately the source whence this information is obtained—the MS. Annals or Mayor-lists—is not above suspicion. The annals are a collection of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century documents,¹ varying slightly among themselves, but evidently, as far as the bulk of the earlier entries are concerned, copies of a common original, now probably lost. A chronological tangle, they contain most valuable and authentic information—particularly about the mystery plays—coupled with entries that are manifestly corrupt. It is conceivable that the earliest annalist placed on record that the prince "rested," *i.e.* remained at the priory during that particular mayoralty, or that he was concerned in some arrest made at the time, and that the entry has been transformed by the errors of successive copyists. In the latter case the process could be paralleled by the entry of 1425 when the MSS. gave as the principal event in the mayoralty of John Braytoft:—"He arrested the Earl of Warwick and brought him to the Goal of this city." This is, beyond all possibility of doubt, an error. No Earl of Warwick was ever arrested at Coventry. Thomas Sharp, who worked eighty or ninety years ago, from documents that have been since destroyed, gives the early, correct version, borne out by independent testimony, when he

¹ Two versions are printed, and there are at least seven in MS. For the former, see Fordun *Scoti-chronicon* (ed. Hearne). V. App. ; Dugdale, *Warw.* (1730), i. 147-53; for MS. versions, see British Museum Harl. MSS. 6,388 (a compilation of several previously existing copies made in 1690 by Humphrey Wanley); Add. MSS. 11,364; Birmingham Free Library, *Warw.*, MSS. 115,915 (see *Athenæum*, No. 4328); Coventry Corp. MSS. A. 37, A. 43, A. 48. An eighteenth-century version in the hands of Mr Eynon of Leamington has relatively correct dates. See also Solly-Flood, *op. cit.*, 50-1.

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reads: "The Earl of Warwick came to Coventry to seize on the Franchises, and inquisition was made of John Grace, and the mayor arrested him and brought him to the Gaol of the City."¹ It is therefore possible that similar errors may have crept into the Hornby entry, though this cannot be dismissed as a pure invention until a searching investigation has been made of contemporary records.

Henry V. seems to have been much beloved in Coventry, if we may judge by the hearty welcome given to him on his coming thither on March 21, 1421. The mayor and council ordered that £100 and a gold cup worth £10 should be presented to the King, and the same to the Queen "in suo adventu a Francia in Coventre," for those times a truly magnificent gift. The citizens never thereafter beheld the King. For in the following year, being overtaken at the Bois de Vincennes by a so grievous sickness that his physicians told him he had but two hours to live, he bade his confessors chant the Penitential Psalms. And in the midst of their chanting, as if in answer to an unseen adversary, he cried: "Thou liest, thou liest! My part is with the Lord Jesus." Thus died Henry V.

Troubles connected with religion soon came upon Coventry. In 1424 the preaching of a hermit attracted a great audience in the Little Park during five days' space. The preacher, one Grace, who had been first a monk, then a friar, and lastly a recluse, disarmed suspicion by announcing that he had been licensed to preach by the bishop's ministers of the diocese. At last, however, a report spread that he was not "licenciate," "and grett seying was among the people that the priour and frer Bredon wold have cursid all tho' that herdon the said John Grace preche." This rumour of the intention of the two most influential churchmen in the city—the head of S. Mary's convent,

¹ Sharp, *op. cit.*, 205.

and the best-known member of the community of Grey Friars—greatly moved the townsfolk, and the two ecclesiastics above-named, fearful lest harm should befall them, refused to leave Trinity church, whither they had repaired for evensong, until the mayor should come to appease the multitude. “Notwithstanding they myght have goone well inoughe whethur thei wold,” the *Leet Book* says, with a touch of contempt. And thus it was that a report went about in the country “that the comens of Coventre wer rysen, and wold have distroyd the priour and the said frer,” which report unhappily spread to the ears of those that were about the King. The next year the Earl of Warwick and a special commission of justices were sent down from Westminster to inquire into this movement within the city.¹ For some time the franchises were in danger of confiscation; but after the citizens had borne great charges, upwards of £80 for “counsel” and other costs, their peace with the ruling powers was made.

It is natural to infer that this disturbance, which the city authorities treated as so trifling, but which appeared to the powers at Westminster a highly serious matter, was connected with Lollard preaching. It seems that this obscure sect was never wholly crushed, but lingered on in certain districts throughout the fifteenth century. Leicestershire, in Wickliffe’s time, had been a perfect hot-bed of heresy. “There was not a man or woman in that county,” it has been said, “save priests and nuns, who did not at that time openly profess their disbelief in the doctrines of the Church, and their approval of the new views of the Lollards.”² The contagion soon spread to Warwickshire. No doubt persecution did its work in many parts. The open profession of Lollardism was highly dangerous in the fifteenth century, and the cause counted many martyrs.

¹ Sharp, *Antiq.*, 205; *Leet Book*, 96-7.

² Thompson, *Hist. Leicester*, 78.

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The Coventry men were, most likely, implicated in the obscure rising under Jack Sharpe in 1431; at least arrests were made in their neighbourhood.¹ These offenders, whose scheme for the disendowment of the Church was both behind and in advance of those times, were shown no mercy, but suffered the penalty of treason. The bishops of Coventry, at a later date, made the city the theatre of their persecutions, whereat many recanted, but others endured to the end.

Echoes, first of the great doings of Englishmen in the French wars, and then of the reverses which befell them, reach us from time to time, chiefly in the form of requests to relieve the royal poverty. And the chief folk of the town frequently travelled to London in order to procure sureties for repayment of money lent to the King or other members of the royal house. Thus when the Earl of Warwick, in 1423, wrote to beg the citizens to relieve the necessities of the child-king Henry, "now in his tender age and his greatest need," informing them, as an incentive to their liberality, that the townsmen of Bristol had "notably and kindly acquit them" in these matters, the citizens lent £100 willingly enough. But with the prudence which distinguished their everyday doings, they sent John Leder, late mayor, to London to negotiate for pledges for future repayment,² which sureties, we are told, "might not be gotten without great labour."³ Richard Joy and Laurence Cook⁴ undertook a like errand the same year, for the protector Gloucester, the husband of Jacoba of Hainault, who proposed—so he informed the citizens—"to pass over the sea with God's might . . . to receive . . . his

¹ *Proc. Privy Counc.*, iv. 89; Ramsay, *Lanc. and York*, i. 437.

² *Leet Book*, 83.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ The surety for the loan "might not be gotten without great cost," and the different emissaries of the citizens spent, one 40s., one 13s. 4d., and another £6, 2s. 2d. in journeys to London, Boston, and Sandwich about this business (*Ib.* 86).

lands and lordships," begged the good folk of Coventry to ease him in his undertaking with £200 "upon sufficient surety." Whether the good folk believed that the expedition to Flanders would turn to "right great ease of the people, and especially of these merchants of this realm," as the duke boasted, we cannot tell; but they sent him 100 marks, insisting nevertheless upon obtaining the security he had been so ready to offer. They gave, however, "with all their good hearts" to those more worthy of respect than Gloucester; and when Talbot was a prisoner in the hands of the French, they sent 23 marks towards his ransom.¹ To the King's later applications for a loan, they usually gave a favourable answer. In 1431 Laurence Cook bore to London £100, lent for the prosecution of the war, "and many lords, spiritual and temporal," the *Leet Book* says, "that is to say, the worthy cardinal, then bishop of Winchester, the bishop of Bath, the bishop of Ely, and the bishop of Rochester, lords spiritual, the duke of York, the duke of Norfolk, the earl of Warwick, the earl of Stafford . . . with other reverent barons and bachelors . . . took the water at Dover, and riveden (arrived) thro' God's grace at Calais, and so comen to the city of Roan (Rouen) by the land of Picardy." ²

Four years later the government was forced yet again to have recourse to borrowing, and on the occasion of the congress at Arras the same sum was collected to relieve the King's necessities "by way of loan" throughout the wards of the city.³

There were other charges besides direct loans that the citizens were forced to support that they might pleasure the members of the royal house. The Dukes of Gloucester and Bedford came frequently to the royal castle of Fullbrook, which lay some four miles beyond Warwick, and the good folk of the town felt called upon

¹ *Leet Book*, 119-20.

² *Ib.*, 129-30.

³ *Ib.*, 174.

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to furnish them with appropriate gifts. Thus, in 1434, a sum of 50 marks, with a silver cup, was presented to the Duchess of Bedford, and an offering to the Duke, of 24 pike, 12 bream, 12 tench, and a ton of red wine.¹ These presents were often not without some political significance. Thus, in 1431, the year wherein the protector Gloucester made a progress through England on the track of the Lollards, the Coventry men, who were, it seems, not free from the suspicion of holding unorthodox tenets, sent to the duke and duchess at Fullbrook a silver cup, 40 marks, and a plentiful supply of fish and wine.²

¹ *Leet Book*, 152. The total cost of these presents (exclusive of the 50 marks and the cup), with the carriage, was £12, 15s. 4d. In addition to this, the expenses of officers and all the worthy men, riding to Fullbrook, amounted to 29s. 6d.

² *Ib.*, 138.

CHAPTER X

The Red and White Rose

WE are now come to the time when the history of Coventry is closely interwoven with that of the nation at large. The city and its neighbourhood became the chosen home of the Court circle during the earlier part of the Wars of the Roses. The Lancastrian cause found some of its staunchest supporters among the folk of the "Queen's secret harbour," as the city was called, because Margaret of Anjou so often took refuge therein to plot and scheme for the undoing of the Yorkists. But the devotion of Coventry to Lancaster did not last throughout the struggle; the citizens' minds were alienated by the Queen's partizan fury at the "Diabolical Parliament" in 1460, and by the unruliness of her troops, and they afterwards professed themselves devoted followers of Edward IV. These professions did not, however, hinder them from backing the winning side when Edward's supremacy was imperilled through Warwick's revolt, and the Yorkist King punished their treachery by the confiscation of the city liberties. It was only by means of Clarence's costly mediation and the payment of an enormous fine that the citizens were enabled to make their peace with Edward. Thus Coventry partook to a greater extent than other towns of the miseries of this dynastic conflict. The citizen class were, as a rule, only too glad to let the barons fight out the question among themselves, submitting, as far as we can judge, to whichever army was victorious

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and at their gates. After all, the battles of the Roses meant little more than the concentration of the fighting power of the kingdom, usually at that period employed in desultory local warfare, into one place, and frequent provincial frays and skirmishes were really more harmful to the district wherein the feud raged than civil war itself.

Happily for the Coventry men there was in the earlier part of the fifteenth century no great lord living within the walls to drag them into his frays and quarrels, and to anticipate that great period of party strife which was so soon to break in upon the kingdom. It is true that the townsfolk had not always been able to keep clear of baronial influence. We hear of fighting between the young Earl Stafford, the lord of Maxstoke, and the citizens, though we are not told what was the cause of the quarrel. Such animosity was felt by the two parties at variance that in 1427 the Duke of Gloucester summoned the mayor with others of the citizens to Leicester, and bound them over to keep the peace.¹ Men held this earl, better known by his later title of the Duke of Buckingham, in great awe, for in war-time he could arm two thousand fighting men bearing the Stafford knot.² "The indignation of the lordship of the said duke,"³ said Sir Baldwin Montfort, whom Buckingham imprisoned in Coventry because he made some difficulty about surrendering his manor of Coleshill into the duke's keeping . . . "had in those days been too heavy and unportable for me to have born." We find the citizens, however, on good terms with this omnipotent nobleman during the civil war; and in 1458 the mayor and his brethren received an invitation to come and share in the festivities which took place at Maxstoke Castle on the occasion of the marriage of one of his younger sons.

¹ *Leet Book*, 112.

² Ramsay, *Lanc. and York*, ii. 169

³ Dugdale, *Warw.*, ii. 1,011.

It is doubtful whether even Buckingham's great influence would have been sufficient to turn the scale in favour of Lancaster in the coming season of strife if the frequent visits of the King and the princes of the reigning family, as well as the old connexion between the city and the first prince of the blood as Duke of Cornwall and Earl of Chester, had not bred among the citizens a feeling of loyalty, which kept them on the side of Henry and Margaret for many years. The year 1449 marks a crisis in the reign of King Henry. The re-opening of the French war was the herald of a series of swift disasters, which put an end to the rule of the English in France. Town after town opened its gates to the invading host of Frenchmen, and Rouen, and with Rouen the last English foothold in Normandy, capitulated after a siege of nineteen days. To this pass had England been brought under the guidance of Suffolk and Somerset, and the King not only breathed no word of dismissing these unpopular ministers, but gave them every mark of his favour and support.

An unmistakable sign of the times was to be found in the fact that the nobles were quietly arming; and acting probably on a hint from the Court, the Coventry men made ready to equip a goodly number of men for the city's defence. Every man that had been mayor was commanded by order of leet to provide 4 jacks, with as many sallets, habergeons, and sheaves of arrows for this purpose; while late bailiffs, chamberlains, and all commoners able to bear the cost were respectively required to furnish three, two, and one of these several parts of an archer's accoutrement.¹ By this means there was provision made for over six hundred men. In the following year, wherein Jack Cade held London in fear

¹ *Leet Book*, 244. A *jack* was a tunic of stuffed leather; a *sallet*, a helmet; and a *habergeon*, a short coat of mail. A unique sallet of the time of the Wars of the Roses, traditionally known as the Black Prince's helmet, is in S. Mary's Hall.

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for many days, a strong guard of forty armed men kept nightly watch within Coventry.¹ As the year drew to a close, there were expectations of war on every side. Wherefore in the beginning of Richard Boys' mayoralty (1451) it was resolved that all the fortifications should be made ready in case of attack. At a great meeting of the worthies of the council on the Saturday after the feast of the Purification, a plan of operations was laid down "for strengthening this city, if need be, which God forbid."² The town ditch was cleansed by common labour, so as to furnish a surer means of protection. Portcullises were made for the gates, and iron chains to close up the ends of divers lanes in the city.³ There was some debate as to whether aldermen should be made over every ward, to whom the men of their several districts might have recourse "if ony aventure falle," but it seems no steps were taken in this direction. Of ammunition the worthy men laid in a plentiful store. Four "gonnes of brasse," two greater called "serpentynes,"⁴ and two smaller, were cast and brought from Bristol at great cost, for they weighed, we are told, 328 lbs., and the price of transport amounted to 6s. 8d. These guns, "a barell of gonnepowdur" thirteen "pelettes" of iron for the larger, and four dozen of lead for the smaller guns, were kept in the tower of Bablake Gate, in readiness for the troubled times which were at hand.

Though England was rid of Suffolk, who, after his impeachment and banishment, was killed on board the *Nicholas of the Tower* by some political enemies, affairs in 1451 prospered no better under the guidance of Somerset and the Queen, and the whole kingdom was uneasy with foreboding of the coming strife. Doubtless the news of the good order which prevailed in Coventry, and of the great military efforts the citizens had made, reached the ears of the King, as he made a progress

¹ *Leet Book*, 253.

³ *Ib.*, 257.

² *Ib.*, 256-60.

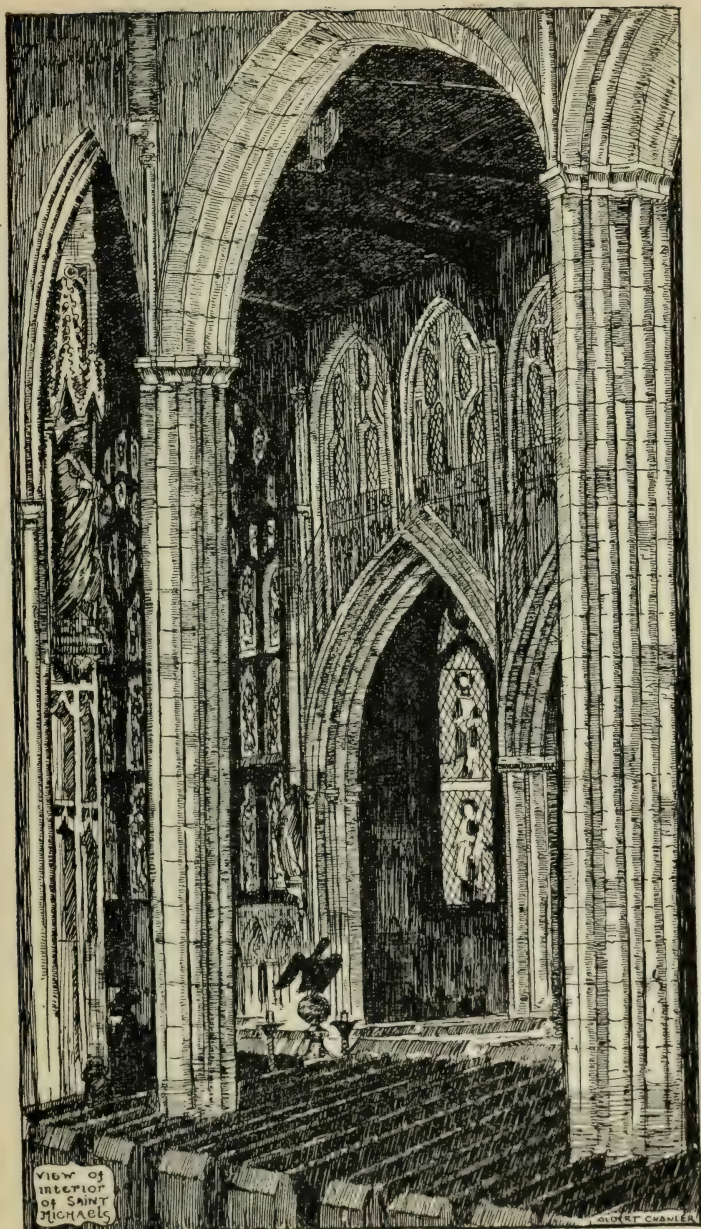
⁴ *Ib.*, 260.

through the Midlands in the late summer of that year. And on September 21 he came from Leicester, another famous Lancastrian fortress, to bestow his praises on the rulers of the city.¹ The men of Coventry made great preparations for his welcoming. And in order to avoid "stody and labur" hereafter, the mayor "let to compile" the account of the King's reception and residence within the city, a sort of manual of etiquette to be referred to in future.

"When the kyng our soveren lorde," the *Leet Book* says, "came from Leycestur toward Coventre, the meyre . . . Richard Boys and his wurthy bredurn arayed in skarlet and all the commonalty² cladde in grene gownes and rede hodes, in Haselwode beyonde the brode oke on horsbak, attented the comeng of our soveren lorde. And also sone as they haddon syght of our soveren lordes presens, the meyre and his peres lyghton on fote, [and] mekely thries kneleng on their knees dud unto our soveren lorde ther due obeysaunce, the meyre seyeng to hym thes wordes: 'Most highest and gracious kyng, ye arn welcome to your true lege menne withe all our hertes'"; and therewith, after taking the mace from a sergeant, he kissed it, and presented it to Henry. "The kyng," the *Leet Book* continues, "tarieng and herkening the meyres speche in faverabull wyse, seyde thes wordes: 'Well seyde, Sir meyre, take your hors.' The meyre then rode forthe afore the kyng bereng his mase in his honde with the knyght-constabull next afore the kynges swerde, the bayles of this cite rideng afore the meyre withe ther mases in ther hondes makeng wey & rome for the kynges comeng; and so they ridon afore

¹ *Leet Book*, 263.

² MS. Coïalte: this contraction will be henceforth written in full. I deviate from the MS. in putting capital letters to proper names, and in writing these in full wherever contractions occur. I have also substituted small letters for capitals whenever the latter would cause confusion to the modern reader.



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the kyng till the kyng come to the vtur¹ yate of the priory. The kyng then forthewithe send for the meyre and his bredurn be a knyght to come to his presence and to speke withe hym in his chambur, and the meyre and his peres accordeng to the kynges comaundement come into his chambur, and thries ther knelleng dudde ther obeysaunse. Thomas Lytelton then recordur² seyde unto the kyng suche wordes as was to his thynkyng most pleasaunt, our soueren lorde seyeng agayne thes wordes, ‘Sirs, I thank you of your goode rule and demene and in speciall for your goode rule the last yere past for the best ruled pepull thenne withe in my reame. And also I thank you for the present that ye nowe gaue to vs’ —the whiche present was a tonne wyne & XX^{ti} grete fatte oxon. The kyng then moreover gaf hem in comaundement to govern well his cite and to see his pease be well kepte as hit hathe been aforetyme, seyeng thenne to hem he wolde be ther goode lorde, and so the meyre and his peres departed.”

With what a glow of pride the town clerk must have recorded all these gracious sayings, little knowing that the King’s good will could avail them nothing in the troublous times that were at hand! Henry, it appears, remained several days at Coventry, the Earl of Salisbury and the Duke of Buckingham attending upon him there with a numerous following. He was engaged, the historian tells us, upon an ineffectual attempt to bring the Dukes of York and Somerset to friendly terms,³ but the former, far from desiring peace, was at that moment weaving plans for his rival’s overthrow. The good-hearted King did not neglect religion in all this pressure of political business.⁴ “The kyng then abydeng stille in

¹ Outer.

² Thomas Littleton, of famous memory, whom Coke made familiar to all. This official was the exponent of the law in the mayor’s court.

³ Ramsay, *op. cit.*, ii. 147.

⁴ *Leet Book*, 264-5.

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the seide priory apou Michaelmas Evon sende the clerke of his closet to the churche of sent Michell to make redy ther his closette, seyeng that the kyng on Michaelmas day wolde go on procession and also her there hygh masse." The "meyre and his peres" suggested that the Bishop of Winchester (Waynflete) should be asked to officiate. "And agayne the kynges comeng to sent Michell churche, the meyre and his peres cladde in skarlet gownes with ther clokes and all oder in ther skarlet gownes wenton vnto the kynges chambur durre ther abyding the kynges comeng." Possibly as an especial honour to the Trinity guild the clerks of Bablake went in the procession through S. Michael's churchyard before the celebration, the King devoutly walking in the train, bare-headed, and "cladde in a gowne of gold tussu furred with a furre of marturn sabull, the meyre bareng the mase afore the kyng . . . tille he come agayne to his closette. At the whyche masse when the king had offerd and hes lordes also, he sende the lorde Bemond (Beaumont) his chamburlen to the meyre, seyeng to him, 'hit is the kinges will ye and your bredurn come and offer,' and so they dudde." After the evensong the King sent by "two for his body and two yeomen of the crown," "the seyde gowne and furre . . . and gave hit frely to god and to sent Michell. Ynsomyche that non of them that brought the gown wolde take no rewarde in no wyse."¹

Henry did not remain long in Coventry after the celebration of the Michaelmas festival. On the following Tuesday he went to Kenilworth, the corporation and the "commonalty" riding with the company and preserving the same order as they had used at his welcoming a few days previously. When they came to a place beyond Asthill Grove, "agayne a brode lane the (that) ledethe to Canley . . . the kyng willeng to speke with the meyre and his bredurn seyde to hem

¹ *Leet Book*, 264-5.

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thes wordes : ‘Sires, I thank you of your goode rule and demene at this tyme, and for goode rule among you hadde and in speciall for your good rule of the yere last past, and where as ye ben now baylies we will that ye be herafter sherefes, and this we graunt to you of our own fre wille and of no speciall desire. Moreour,’” he went on, mindful no doubt of his own danger, and of the preparations for war among the factious nobles of the country, “‘we charge you withe our pease among you to be kepte and that ye suffer no ryottes, conventiculs ne congregacions of lewde pepull among you, and also that (ye) suffer no lordes lyvereys, knyghtes, ne swyers (squires) to be reseyved of no man withe in you for hit is agayne our statutes . . . and yif ye be thus ruled we will be your goode lorde.’ And thus don, the meyre and his bredurn takeng ther leve of the kyng . . . departed and ridon to Coventre agayne,” no doubt astounded at the idea of this new responsibility and greatness now thrust upon them. The mayor and council held great consultations concerning the bailiffs’ acquisition of the sheriffs’ dignity summoning Thomas Littleton, their recorder, and Henry Boteler, who was soon to be this famous lawyer’s successor in the office, to their deliberations, to learn what privileges were most needful for them to include within the charter which was to convert their city into “the city and *county* of Coventry.”¹

In the year 1453, which saw the close of the Hundred Years’ War and the birth of a Prince of Wales, Henry was attacked by insanity.² In 1454 the King’s recovery marked the close of the Duke of York’s protectorate

¹ *Leet Book*, 265-6. The city and the adjoining hamlets were joined together as a county. The mayor, according to the charter, was made steward and marshal of the king’s household.

² There were great preparations for the civil strife during this year (Ramsay, ii. 169). The prince of Wales was invested with the appanage of Cornwall in 1455 (*Ib.*, ii. 219). The Coventry men henceforth owned him as their lord and protector.

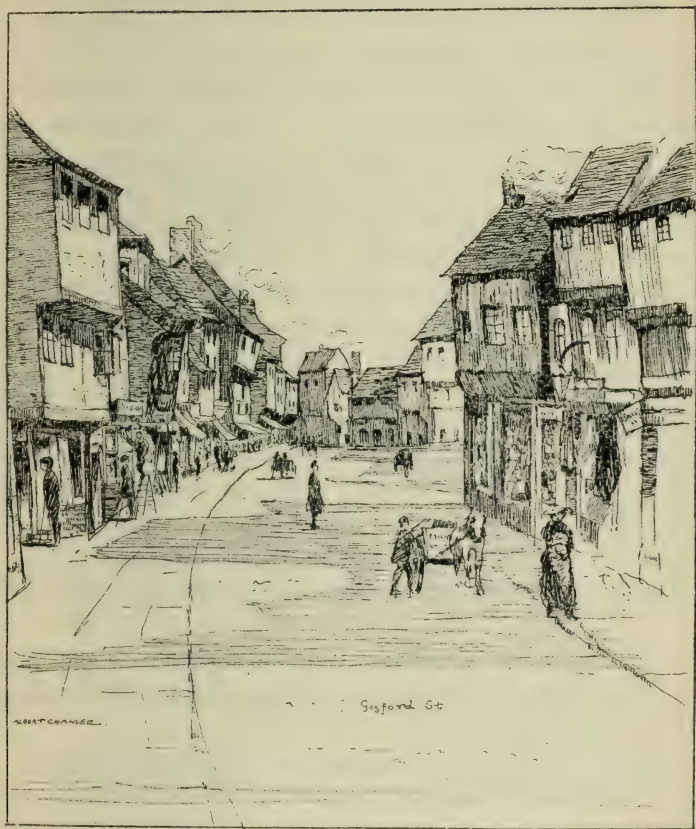
and the restoration to power of the Queen's friends, particularly Somerset. The Yorkist party fell into disgrace, and measures were taken to compass their destruction the following spring in a parliament to be held at Leicester. The duke on hearing this drew sword in the north, and marched on London with a goodly following at his back. The royal troops barred his way at S. Alban's; but when the first battle of that long and weary struggle was fought out at that town on the great London highway, the Coventry men were not found in Henry's ranks. In fact the battle was hardly looked for at that time. It is true the townsfolk received a summons for "such feliship . . . in their best and most defensable aray" as they could furnish, and that "having tendurnes of the well fare and also of the saveguard of our soveren lorde," they duly equipped 100 men. Much ado was made to provide the men with a new "pensell" or standard "in tarturne," at a cost of 16d. ; 14d. went "in rybands" to the same, while the making, with a tassel of silk attached to it, cost a similar sum; "bends," or badges of red and green, were also provided, with a garment of red, green, and violet for the captain. But in spite of all this preparation the men never saw S. Alban's fight, or the terrible execution done by Richard, Earl of Warwick, among the Lancastrian ranks. For on May 22, the day whereon the mayor received the commission, the battle was fought and over, and the King in the hands of his victorious enemies. "They wenton not," says the *Leet Book*, with some reticence in referring to the soldiers, "for certen tydenges that wern brought," the King having returned to London.¹

Henry was shortly after this again attacked by insanity, and for a few months York was appointed regent. Duke Richard's power did not, however, wholly cease with the King's recovery, and after March 1456 he continued for some months to direct the government, which

¹ *Leet Book*, 283.

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was nominally in the hands of the Bouchiers, half-brothers of the Duke of Buckingham. Meanwhile the two arch-enemies, the Queen and the Duke of York, watched and "waited on" each other ceaselessly until



August, when Margaret's plans were laid, and she drew off the King to sport in the Midlands, having fortified Kenilworth with cannon in case of another appeal to arms. A great council of notables was summoned to meet at Coventry for October 7.¹ The news of the

¹ Ramsay, ii. 199.

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Queen's intended visit reached the city about August 24, and a council was called to provide for her highness's welcome.¹ A hundred marks was collected throughout the wards to be given as an offering to the Prince of Wales and his mother, together with two cups whereof the joint value amounted to £10, 7s. 1d. The prince did not, however, accompany the Queen on this occasion, so fifty marks were laid aside "against his coming," though the magnificence of his mother's reception was not lessened on this account. The "makyng of the premisses" of the Queen's welcoming fell to the lot of one John Wedurby, of Leicester,² and by his arrangement pageants as gaily dressed as at the Corpus Christi festival, with appropriate personages standing thereon to utter words of welcome, were placed at all the principal points in the streets between Bablake and the "utter" gate of the Priory. John Wedurby thought as other men of his time, that Margaret's son would one day have rule in England, and hoped that each party would forget their differences and live in peace under his government.

"The blessyd babe that ye have born prynce Edward is he,
Thurrowe whom pece & tranquilite shall take this reme
(realm) on hand,"

said Prudence to the Queen in the pageant of the four Cardinal Virtues; while the prophet Isaiah declared to the Queen that,—

"Like as mankynde was gladdid by the birght of Jhesus,
So shall this empyre joy the birthe of your bodye."

And the companion prophet Jeremiah was equally positive:

"The fragrant floure sprongen or you shall so encrece &
sprede,
That all the world yn ich (each) party shall cherisshe hym &
love & drede."

¹ *Leet Book*, 285.

² *Ib.*, 292.

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In his conception of the Queen's character Wedurby was a thorough courtier.

"The mellyflue mekenes of your person shall put all wo away,"

the same prophet said; and S. Edward greeted her as "moder of mekeness."

To what strange freaks will not the rules of his art—and especially alliteration—betray a poet! The "she wolf of France" had nothing of the quality thus assigned to her; her name had merely the same initial letter.

The King and Queen entered Coventry on Holy Cross day, by the Bablake Gate.¹ Close by the entrance was a pageant whereon stood the two above-named prophets, and a "Jesse," or figure representing the genealogy of Christ, was placed upon the gate itself. At the east end of Bablake church were the figures of the Confessor—in allusion to Prince Edward—and S. John the Evangelist. A few paces distant at the conduit in Smithford Street the four Cardinal Virtues were displayed. A second set of pageants, grouped in the open spaces at the Cheaping, next met the Queen's eyes. There were the Nine Conquerors, Hector, Alexander, and the rest; and finally by the conduit a stage was placed whereon S. Margaret appeared, "sleying" a great dragon "by myracull." While upon the cross itself were grouped a company of angels, and the pipes of the conduit ran wine. Between the cross and the conduit the Queen received the homage of the Nine Conquerors, while her name-saint gave to her a final salutation:

"Most notabull princes of wymen erthle,
Dame Margarete, the chefe myrth of this empyre,
Ye be hertely welcum to this cyte,
To the plesure of your highnes I wyll sette my desyre,

¹ *Leet Book*, 287; first printed in Sharp, *Antiq.*, pp. 228-231.

Bothe nature & gentilnes doth me require,
Seth we be both of one name, to shew you kyndnes,
Wherefore by my power ye shall have no distresse;
I shall pray to the prince that is endeles,
To socour you with solas of his high grace.
He wyll here my petition, this is doutles,
For I wrought all my lyf & that his wyll wace;
Therefore, lady, when ye be yn any dredeful cace,
Call on me boldly, ther of I pray you,
And trist to me feythefully I well do that may pay yow."

John Wedurby was, no doubt, an indifferent poet, but viewed in the light of subsequent events, his verses have all sorts of ironical and tragic meanings, whereof he was, of course, wholly unconscious.

The pageants and welcome entertainments cost the citizens not a little, we may suppose, in time and treasure. They made the king a present of a tun of wine costing £8, os. 4d.; while by the "advice of his council" the mayor distributed 20s. among "divers persons of the king's house."¹ Lord Rivers too had a glass of rose-water at the mayor's expense, whereof the cost was 2s.; thirteen years later his lordship had a very bitter drink at Coventry.² Still the coming of the Court no doubt brought trade to the city; had it brought also peace, all would have been well. The council met on October 7, and a blow was aimed at the Duke of York in the dismissal of the Bouchiers.³ It was even said that the duke's life was in danger, but that his kinsman, the Duke of Buckingham, assisted him to escape. Margaret required the presence of Somerset to lend strength to her party, and with him there came, it seems, a company of turbulent retainers. These men fell out with the city-watch and slew three or four of the townsmen; whereat, says a writer in the Paston series, "the larum belle was ronge and the toun arose and

¹ *Leet Book*, 292.

² Beheaded on Gosford Green, 1469.

³ York and Warwick swore to keep the peace (Ramsay, ii, 199).

would have jouperdit to have distressed the men of the duke of Somerset, ne had the duke of Buks taken direccion therin.”¹ Coventry was already ceasing to be the well-ordered and peaceful place whereon the mind of King Henry loved to dwell. Next year we hear that the civic finances were disorganised, that the officers of the city were negligent in the performance of their duty, and that the citizens, being “of froward dispositions,” were inclined to appeal to “mighty men in strange shires” for their support in carrying on lawsuits against their neighbours in courts without the city.

In February, 1457, the court was again at Coventry; the King came thither on the 11th “to his bedde,” and the Queen coming “suddenly” next day “unto her mete.”² Margaret was doubtless burdened with some weighty tidings, for “she came rydyng byhynde a man, and so rode the most part of all her gentylwemen then, at which tyme she sende vn to the meyre and his brethern that she wold not that [the] spiritualte ne the temporalte shold be laburd to met her then, and so she was not met at that tyme.” A great council³ was held at Coventry from February 15 to March 14, all the great men of both parties being present, and the Duke of York was reappointed to the deputyship of Ireland. Henry left the city for Kenilworth on March 14, the mayor and his brethren, and a “goodly fellowship of the city” having “right great thank” for accompanying his high-

¹ *Paston Letters* (ed. Gairdner), i. 408.

² *Leet Book*, 297.

³ The Archbishop of York, the Bishops of Winchester, London, Lincoln, Norwich, Exeter, Worcester, Chester, Hereford, and Salisbury; the Abbots of Glastonbury, Bury S. Edmunds, Gloucester, Malmesbury, Cirencester; Lawrence Booth, privy seal; the Dukes of Exeter, Buckingham, Somerset; the Earls of Shrewsbury, treasurer, Stafford, Northumberland, Arundel and Devonshire; the Lord of S. John's, the Lords Roos, Suydeley, steward of the Household, Stanley, Beauchamp, Berners, Grey de Ruthyn, Lovell, Wells, Willoughby, and Dudley, were present.

ness "to the utter side of their franchise." A characteristic touch is given concerning Margaret's departure for Coleshill two days later. The mayor, his brethren, and a "feyre felyship" of the commons—we seem to gather from these words that there was but a scanty attendance—went with Queen Margaret to the boundary of the city liberties. The mayor, having his mace in his hand, rode immediately before her, the sheriffs with their white yards or rods directly preceding the mayor. Hitherto this ceremony in its completeness had only been observed when the King was in question. "And so," the *Leet Book* says, "they did never before the quene tyll then, for they bere before that tyme alwey their servants (sergeants') mases . . . at her comynges, at which doying her officers groged (grudged), seying the quene owed to be met yn like fourme as the kyng shold, which yn dede," the writer continues with some trepidation, "as ys seide owe to be so, except her displeser wold be eschewed."¹

An unexplained rising took place at Hereford in April, and the King and Queen went thither to quell it, Margaret alienating even her friends in that district by her severity. At Whitsuntide, however, the whole Court again sojourned at Coventry, and a grand procession at the Pentecostal feast dazzled the eyes of the citizens.² The Duke of Buckingham followed next after Henry, but Lord Beaumont "bere the kynges treyne," the Earl of Stafford "his cap of astate," and Sir John Tunstall his sword. The great nobles followed every one in his proper rank, while after her the Queen and her chief lady, the Duchess of Buckingham, there came "mony moo ladyes yn her mantels, surcotes, and other appareyll to theyre astates acustomed." Mass was celebrated in the cathedral by the Bishop of Hereford, assisted by the dean of the King's chapel, the prior and his monks.

¹ *Leet Book*, 298.

² *Ib.*, 299.

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Queen Margaret could occasionally be gracious, and her eagerness to see the Mystery Plays performed at the feast of Corpus Christi must have flattered the citizens. She came “prively” from Kenilworth on the eve of the festival, and “lodged at Richard Wodes, the grocer,¹ where Richard Sharp sometime dwelled; and there all the plays were first played,” save *Doomsday*, the drapers’ pageant, which could not be seen, for evening came on and put a close to the performance. The mayor and bailiffs sent a present to Richard Wood’s house, namely “ccc (300) paynemaynes,² a pipe of rede wyne, a dosyn capons of haut grece,³ a dosyn of grete fat pykes, a grete panyer full of pescodes and another panyer of pipyns and orynges, & ij cofyns of counfetys, & a pot of grene gynger.” Quite a little court was assembled at the grocer’s house to witness those strange spectacles in which the dramatic instinct of the Middle Ages found vent. The Duke of Buckingham and “my lady his wife,” who might be regarded as natives of the city, would do the honours of the place; and let us hope those ardent Lancastrians, Lord Rivers and his lady, father and mother of the future queen, Elizabeth Woodville, and the elder and younger Countess of Shrewsbury, applauded the ravings of Pilate and Herod, the pompous characters of the religious drama, or heard with complaisance the devil’s jokes. It is hard to imagine Queen Margaret, that tireless fighter and plotter, or Lady Shrewsbury, the great Talbot’s widow, whose feud with the Berkeleys filled Gloucestershire with strife for over a generation, engaged in such a harmless amusement as laughing over the quaint performances of their citizen supporters, nibbling the while some of the good mayor’s supply of apples and sweetmeats. How delighted the citizens were at her highness’s condescension! When she went next day “to her mete” to Coleshill, “right a good feliship

¹ *Leet Book*, 300.

² Fine white bread; *panis dominicus*, lord’s bread.

³ Fat.

—which plesid her highnes right well,”—attended her to the “vtmast side of theyre franchise, where hit plesyd her to gyff them grete thank bothe for theyre present and theyre gentyll attendaunce.” In the August of that same year, Henry and his Queen again visited Coventry, sleeping there from August 31 until September 2, and “about x of the belle” on the latter day the Queen rode to Sharneford and on to sleep at Leicester “to-ward the forest of Rokyngham for to hunt,” while at two o’clock Henry rode forth on his journey towards Northampton, and the men of Coventry did not see them again for two years, when a more troubled scene had opened.

The records of Coventry are nothing but a blank during the succeeding years; for the council merely met at the appointed season to elect a mayor, but transacted, as far as we know, no other business; tradition has it that the city was divided against itself, a highly probable case when we consider how high the tide of Yorkist and Lancastrian party spirit was running in the rest of the country. In the political world this season was filled by ineffectual peacemakings and renewed preparations for war. Warwick, after provoking the wrath of the Lancastrian party, fled to Calais, and his father, Salisbury, met and worsted Lord Audley, the royalist leader, who had been sent to capture him, at the field of Bloreheath (September 23, 1459). The Yorkist lords flew to arms; but when the King proposed to give battle at Ludford, weakened by the defection of a certain Andrew Trollope, they all dispersed and fled. The Yorkists being thus humbled, the time was come for Margaret’s vengeance. No writs were sent to the principal Yorkist chiefs for the parliament summoned to meet at Coventry on November 20, and the knights and burgesses were nominated by the Lancastrian leaders. The assembly met, and, by one sweeping act of attainder, deprived twenty-three leading Yorkists of their inherit-

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ance. People called this the "diabolical parliament"; henceforward there was no hope of a reconciliation between York and Lancaster. A petition¹ presented by John Rous, the antiquary of Guy's Cliffe, to this parliament, calling attention to the enclosure of common lands and increase of pasture, is now lost; it fell on deaf ears at that time of party strife.

It seems that the Queen's late violent proceedings, or the plundering propensities of her followers, had caused the townspeople to grow somewhat cold in her cause. When a commission of array dated from Northampton arrived a few days before the Candlemas feast, 1460, the sheriffs kept it back, and it was fourteen days before the newly elected mayor, John Wyldegrys,² received the missive addressed to his predecessor conveying the king's command. This was surely not the result of accident but design, the sheriffs having their own reasons for thwarting the mayor, or being ardent Yorkists. Then the Duke of Buckingham arrived, perhaps to learn the reason of the delay, and the mayor bethought him of this indiscretion. "To my lord of Buckingham," lodging at the "Angel," he sent to ask whether "any hurt might grow to the city" because of the neglect of the commission, and to ensure the duke's goodwill, sent thirty loaves, two pike, two tench, some capons, a peacock, and a peahen to his lodging.

A letter which he received from the King about this time hardly tended, it may be thought, to reassure John Wyldegrys.³ "For asmuche," the King wrote, "as credible reporte is made vn to us howe diuers of th' inhabitantes of oure cite of Coventre haue, sithe the tyme of oure departyng from thens, vsed and had right vnfitting langage ayenst oure estate and personne, and in favouring of oure supersticious⁴ traitours, and rebelles, nowe late in oure parlement there attained, wherby

¹ Rous, *Hist. Reg. Angliæ* (Hearne), 120.

² *Leet Book*, 308.

³ *Ib.*, 309.

⁴ Query?

grete comocions and murmur ben like to folowe, to the grete distourbanche of oure feithfull, true subgettes, onlesse that punisshement and remede for the redresse therof the rather be had, we therfor . . . charge you diligently t' enquer and make serche among the seid inhabitants of suche vnfittyng langage as is aboue seid, and do theym to be emprysoned and punisshed accordyng to their demerits, and in example of other of semblable condicion, as ye desyre to do that shall please vs." ¹

John Wyldegrys probably executed this commission with all the alacrity of fear, and we hear that in the following October the Duke of York had a strange commission to sit in judgment on various offenders in Coventry "to punish them by the fawtes to the kyng's lawys." But the duke, who was on his way home from Ireland, could not afford to tarry, having weightier business on hand, namely, the laying claim to the throne of England, and the drawing up of a genealogy to lay before parliament, showing that his claim to the throne was based on rightful inheritance. Since the battle of Northampton (July 10, 1460), the King had been in the hands of the Yorkist lords, Salisbury and Warwick.² At this battle, too, Henry lost Buckingham, the most powerful man at the time in Warwickshire, and a pillar of the Lancastrian cause. After his death, maybe, the men of Coventry felt more free to choose what side they would, and the plunder wherein Margaret's host indulged after Wakefield (December 14) and S. Alban's (February 17, 1461) completed their alienation from the Lancastrian party. The Yorkists had now the upper hand in the city. After the battle of S. Alban's £100 was collected throughout the wards for men to go to

¹ *Leet Book*, 309.

² Henry was at Coventry when he heard of the landing of the Yorkist lords Salisbury and Warwick on June 23 (Holinshed, iii. 654).

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London with "the earl of March,"¹ who, since his father's death at Wakefield, had become the hope of the Yorkist cause. On the day after his coronation (March 5) Edward IV. dispatched a letter to the mayor and his brethren full of thanks for the citizens' loyalty to his cause, praying for their "good continuance in the same," and praising their "good and substantial rule." He thus assured the support of the people of the place, and on the terrible field of Towton, where "the dead hindered the living from coming to close quarters," the men of Coventry fought under the standard of the Black Ram in the Yorkist ranks. The *Leet Book* tells us that £80 was collected throughout the wards for the 100 men "which went with oure soverayn liege lord kyng Edward the IIII^{the} to the felde yn the north."²

Many of the towns took part with Edward in this famous battle, for order and good government seemed more likely to follow from the Yorkist than the Lancastrian rule. Each town went to the field under their ancient ensign. As a contemporary ballad has it:—

"The wolf came fro Worcester, ful sure he thought to byte,
The dragon came fro Gloucester, he bent his tayle to smyte;
The griffin cam fro Leycester, flying in as tyte,
The George cam fro Nottingham, with spere for to fyte."³

The citizens certainly continued to deserve the King's favour. They presented him with £100 and a cup to his "welcome to his cite of Coventre from the felde yn the North,"⁴ and decorated the city with pageants and goodly shows in his honour, the smiths' craft providing the character of Samson, who no doubt gave in appropriate verses the promise to use his great strength in defending the King's just claim "to his newly-acquired

¹ Afterwards Edward IV. (*Leet Book*, 313).

² *Ib.*, 315.

³ Thompson, *Leicester*, 88.

⁴ *Leet Book*, 316.

sovereignty.”¹ In that year also all men dwelling in the city were sworn to King Edward to be “his true lege men.” In later times the King learnt to distrust this ancient Lancastrian refuge, but for the present there was nothing but amity between himself and the citizens. So vivid was the remembrance of the plundering of Margaret’s army, that the old loyalty towards the Lancastrians turned to rancour. And the same spring, on the King-maker’s coming—the first important mention of him in the city annals—£40 was collected to be given to him for the payment of forty men that went to the north to resist “kyng Herry and quene Marget *that were*, and alle other with theym accompanied, as Scottes and Frenchemen, of theyre entreyn to this lande.” The mere whisper of a foreign alliance and invasion was sufficient to damn the Lancastrian cause, for Lord Rous, with other refugees, aided by the Scots, were making trouble on the Border. The men returned on July 29, for the north was pacified, men believed, the Scots having rebellions, stirred up by King Edward, to look to nearer home.

¹ Sharp, *Mysteries*, 152.

CHAPTER XI

The Last Struggle of York and Lancaster—the Tudors and Stuarts

THE men of Coventry settled down under the rule of Edward IV.; and if the clash of arms was heard in the north—for Margaret would not tamely submit to lose her son's inheritance—it did not disturb the Midlands. Henry VI., the weak, mad, saintly King, lay in the Tower of London, and men thought the Yorkist firmly seated on his throne. The wars and party troubles had, however, much disorganized the city finances, and it is probably from this time that we must date the backwardness of the city in paying their ferm to the exchequer; and though the vigorous measures of the leet may have kept temporary order for those within and without the ruling body, yet the embarrassments of the corporation were not past. An attack on the franchises,¹ made, so it would appear from some words the steward of Cheylesmore let fall, at the instigation of some of the malcontents within the city in 1464, was the cause of much trouble and fear to the townsfolk. The arrest of one Hikman, a dyer, a craft always at daggers drawn with the corporation, in Cheylesmore Park, was the occasion of the trouble. At the instance of the officials of the royal manor,² Edward IV. called in question the

¹ *Leet Book*, 322.

² They declared that Cheylesmore was "seyntwary," i.e. sanctuary. On the evils of rival jurisdictions, and the consequent escape of offenders fleeing from town justice, see Green, i. 311.

right of the city officers to make arrests within the manorial territory. The matter was decided in the



city's favour after many journeys and much suffering of the law's delays.

Edward treated the Coventry folk graciously enough, paying them several visits at this time¹; but another figure had begun to loom large in English politics, and

¹ *Lect Book*, 326.

Warwick, the King-maker, now exercised even more power in the Midlands than had been enjoyed by the Lancastrian Buckingham. In 1464 the earl first appears as meddling in the internal affairs of Coventry. A quarrel arose between a certain William Bedon and William Huet about a debt—it may have been a party affair between the weavers and tailors—and appeal was made to Edward IV. The matter, the King declared, was “screpus and doubtefull,” and directed that the litigants should abide by the arbitration of certain citizens, or that the mayor, in the event of their inability to decide upon the case before Michaelmas, should step in and dispose of the matter.

Accordingly at the appointed time, when the arbitrators failed to agree, the mayor took the matter into his own hands, and decreed that Huet should ask Bedon’s forgiveness for his behaviour towards him, giving also 40s. “for amends.” “Which laude and decree,” the *Leet Book* says, “the seid William Huet yn neyther braunche wold not obey, but utterly refusyd,” using “right vnfyttyng, inordinate and ceducious langage sownyng to the derogacion of the kynges lawes and of his peace, yn right evyll example, for the which the seid mair, vmper,¹ be the advyse of his seid brethern, comyttid hym to warde,” the King giving him “right good and special thank” for his action in this behalf. Tiptoft, it appears, who was then in the city, kept Edward informed of the progress of the business. But the affair soon assumed serious proportions, and the King wrote to inform the mayor that if any others vexed their neighbours by any “imaginacions, sclaundours or feyned accusacions hereafter,” or made any “conventicles,” they were to be repressed; the officer requiring all the king’s liege men in the city to aid him in the work “at thair peril.”²

But peace was not to be restored by these means, for

¹ *i.e.* umpire.

² *Leet Book*, 331.

the city authorities had still to reckon with Huet, who lay in prison. By the "meane of his frendes," the account goes on, he "labored vnto my lord of Warrewyk for favor and ease to be had yn the seid decree at my lordes instaunce, so that to ouer gret rebuke ne charge were not don to the seid William yn makyng therof. And theruppon the seid mair, allethough after his dimeretys, well and indifferently be hym vnderstondon, he were worthy to have made as lowly submission as cowde be thought therfore, and to have boron to the utmost of his godes besides that, and rightwesnes without mercy shold have ben don therin; but at the seid instaunce leying rightwesnes apart and folowyng mercy," the mayor "made his laude and decree thus: that the seid William Huet shuld be of good seying and behavyng fro that tyme fourth, and that he shuld yeve the seid William Bedon 10 marcs in amendes towards his costes. And so he did, which amounted not to the thryd peny that he had made hym to spende; and yette further at my seid lordes instaunce"—here the mayor, sadly confused and harassed by the divergence of the paths of "mercy" and "righteousness," takes up the account in his own person—"my worshipfull Brethren and I so effectuely entreted the seid William Bedon, that he yave the seid Huet agayn V nobles of the seid X marcs." Then Huet, being further bound over to keep the peace, was "set at his large," or released.

Owing to these repeated attacks, as well as to the unsettled state of the kingdom, things had not prospered with the Coventry corporation. They were in 1468 £800 in arrear of their annual ferm of £50. The sheriff was ordered to seize the goods of the mayor and men of the place as distress. He could find no more than 106s. worth of goods, and these "remained on his hands for lack of buyers," "and since the said mayor and men had no other goods or lands within the bailiwick that could be taken into the king's hands, no further payment was

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then made,"¹ a rather amusing betrayal of the helplessness of the central government. But the Trinity and Corpus Christi guilds were bodies possessed of great wealth, though upon their funds the exchequer had no claim, thanks to the astuteness of the corporation in thus disposing of its possessions. But no doubt the resources both of guilds and townsmen were failing, even as those of the monastery, for in 1466 the prior was £550 in arrears to the Crown for the rent of the Earl's-half; his tenants in the city must therefore have been backward in paying the rent due to the priory treasury. And to add to the general confusion in 1469 the commonalty rose crying that they were defrauded of their lawful share of the Lammas lands. More serious than all, when civil war again broke loose and Edward and Warwick measured swords together, the men of Coventry chose the losing side, nor did a too late repentance avail to save them from the terrible humiliation of a temporary forfeiture of their franchises.

Meanwhile matters were going from bad to worse in the government of England. The great earl was becoming rapidly estranged from his young kinsman, Edward, whom he had helped to place on the throne. Jealousy of the Queen's relations, and the decay of his own influence in the royal councils, were rapidly converting Warwick into a secret enemy of the ruling house. Edward² was in favour of a Burgundian alliance; the King-maker, on the contrary, pressed forward the claims of France to the friendship of England, and when the King treated the French ambassadors with scant courtesy, his too powerful subject entered into intrigues with Louis XI. on his own behalf. He had some thoughts of placing on the throne his future son-in-law, the Duke of Clarence; and Calais, where the earl and the King's

¹ Madox, *Firma Burgi*, 217.

² The King was at Coventry at Christmas 1467, doubtless to keep an eye on Warwick's movements (Ramsay, ii. 327).

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brother were staying, became in 1469 a perfect hotbed of conspiracy.

How far Warwick carried with him the general sentiment of English folk is rather doubtful, but so great was his territorial influence that he was a highly dangerous enemy. Besides, there were various elements of disaffection abroad in the land. The Lancastrians had still some hold on the hearts of those living in the north and west, while others who had expected an era of peace and perfection under Yorkist rule were naturally disappointed at the small results of Edward's government. Though there seems to have been no very distinct notion of what the people wanted, one thing was clear, they wanted a change, and the country was filled with the old tokens of unrest and discontent. Bad times seem rather unaccountably to have befallen the people of Coventry; the city was deeply in debt, and on that account the citizens were probably more willing to lend an ear to Warwick's emissaries. It is possible that foreign trade relations may have more to do than we are at present aware with town politics. The great merchants of the Staple, who were heads of the powerful civic families, and who possessed the monopoly of trade in wool, would welcome the alliance with Burgundy, and a ready export of the raw material to Flanders; while the bulk of the townsfolk, clothworkers and artisans, were glad that the wool should be kept in England and be converted into cloth by home manufacture. For that reason Warwick and his anti-Burgundian policy may have been popular in cloth-working towns such as Coventry then was.

We follow with difficulty the record of obscure risings which marked the beginning of a fresh struggle. Two movements agitated the north in the early part of the year 1469. One seems to have been a Lancastrian outbreak; the other, under Robin of Redesdale, was undoubtedly fomented by Warwick. The men of

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Coventry found themselves as usual drawn into the strife. They were compelled to pay, and send fifty men to York against the rebels,¹ who joined their forces together, and finally turned southwards under Sir John Coniers towards the Midlands. For some time Edward appeared unconscious of the danger that threatened him, and during June he went quietly on a progress through the eastern counties. At last there came a rude awakening. On July 1,² he wrote from Fotheringay, bidding the mayor take and commit to ward any person using seditious language among the King's liege people to the intent to "stor and incens theym to rumor and comocion"; and later letters were urgent in their appeals for dispatch of men. Meanwhile the extent of Warwick's plotting stood revealed. On July 12 came tidings from this arch conspirator, who, far from being the haughty noble of the conventional type, was, as his latest biographer³ tells us, very affable in his bearing and an ardent seeker after the commonalty's good will. Warwick had very probably gained a strong party among the populace at Coventry, and in addition to the letter destined for the mayor, the messenger bore a duplicate addressed to his master's "servonds and welwyllers" within the city.⁴ "Ryght trusty and well belovyd frende,"

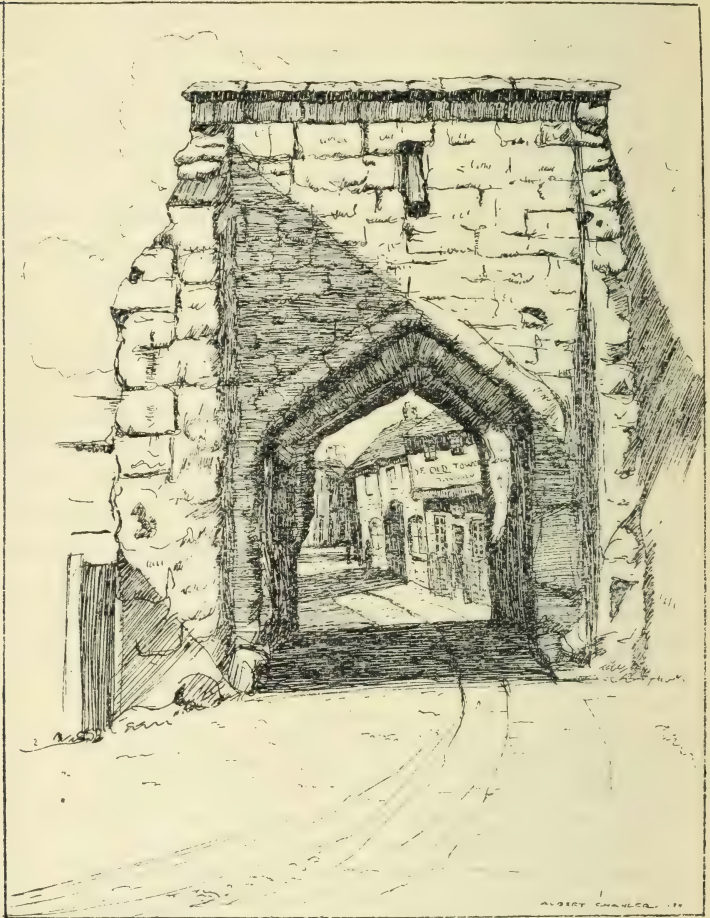
¹ *Leet Book*, 343. The mayor, William Saunders, dyer, gave £5 to the collection of money for the soldiers, so that poor people might be spared (*Ib.*, 344). Either owing to the fact that the cause was unpopular, or that the people were weary of war, soldiers could not be had under 10d. a day. The air at this time was filled with rumours; one John Baldwin cordwainer, of Dartmouth, had been committed to ward within the city for delivering treasonable letters in England, though he did it out "of innocence and simpleness," being unaware of their contents (*Ib.*, 340).

² The first commission of array, dated Stamford, July 5, urged the citizens to send 100 archers against the rebels. The second (Newark, July 10) bade them hasten their preparations and make no risings or assemblies (*Ib.*, 341, 343).

³ See Oman, *Warwick the King-maker*. ⁴ *Leet Book*, 342.

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the earl wrote to the mayor, William Saunders, "I grete you well. Forsomuche as hyt hath pleasyd the kings



COOK STREET, GATE

gode grace to sende at this tyme for hys lords and other hys subgetts to atende on hys hygnes northwards, and that both the rihgt hye and myghty prince, my lord the duke of Clarens, and I be fully purposid, after the

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solempnizacion of the maryage by Godds grace in short tyme to be hadde bitwene my sayd lord and my dohgter, to a wayte on the same, and to drawe vn to our sayd soveren lordes hyghnes, therfor desire and pray you that ye woll in the meene tyme geve knowlache to all suche felisshipp as ye mowe make [toward theym] to arredy theym in the best wyse they can, and that bothe ye and they defensibly arrayd be redy apou a days warnyng to accompany my sayd lord and me toward the sayd highnes, as my specyall trust ys in yowe; yevyng credens to this berer in that he shall open vnto you on my behalve, and ore Lord have you in hys keping. Writon at London the xxviii day of Juyn." The marriage thus referred to was solemnised some ten days or more after the date of the missive—July 11, Clarence and Archbishop Neville having secretly stolen over to Calais, where Warwick was then posted, to take part in the ceremony; and the next day the King-maker and his following landed on the coast of Kent.

The letter¹ as it stands conveys but scanty indications of the real state of affairs, but no doubt the citizens read between the lines, and in "giving credence to the bearer" heard as much as the earl wished of his plans for the overthrow of the Queen's relations and the recovery of the Neville influence. Whether they understood that Clarence, Warwick's son-in-law, was to occupy his brother Edward's place, and be raised to the throne, is another matter. Nevertheless they must have been somewhat bewildered by Warwick's change of front. Lancaster they knew, and York they knew, but they might with all justice ask, "Who are ye?" of the King-maker.

Once more, as in Margaret's time, Coventry, with its

¹ A manifesto, issued July 12, calling upon all "true subjects to join Warwick in presenting certain articles of petition to the king" (*v. Ramsay*, ii. 337), is not mentioned in the *Leet Book*. The citizens of Coventry did not, it seems, join Warwick, they sent men to Edward (*Leet Book*, 345-6).

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command of the north-western road, became a centre of operations. News now came thick and fast. Coniers' army of Yorkshiremen, supplied with a later manifesto and petition of grievances promulgated by Warwick, and the royal troops under Herbert and Stafford of Southwick, were converging towards Banbury. On Maudlin day (July 22) Coventry was hastily fortified, certain of the principal citizens overlooking the equipment of soldiers and the strengthening of the gates with cannon. On the 26th July the battle of Edgcote was fought near Banbury, ending in the discomfiture of Herbert and the royalist troops. For just when victory seemed assured, a rabble of Northampton men, led by one John Clapham, bearing the banner of the White Bear, and shouting "a Warwick! a Warwick!" appeared over the hillside in the rear of Lord Herbert's men, and they, thinking the Earl himself was come, broke and fled. "Lord Herbert," the *Leet Book* says, "was taken in fight by Banbury with Robin of Redesdale" on the vigil of S. James, and was brought to Northampton, and there beheaded, and Lord Richard Herbert, with others.¹ Some days afterwards Edward was captured at Honiley or Olney, near Kenilworth, and brought by Archbishop Neville to Coventry, there to meet the Archbishop's "brother of Warwick."² He was detained in the city as a prisoner until August 9. But even then his humiliation was not complete. Three days later, when the King was certainly no further removed from the city than Warwick, the father and brother of Edward's Queen, Lord Rivers and his son, John Woodville, who had been captured by rioters at Chepstow, fell into Warwick's hands, and were beheaded on Gosford Green by his order.³ The *Leet Book* also records the execu-

¹ *Leet Book*, 346.

² Ramsay, ii. 343; Oman, *Warwick*, 189. Oman says Olney in Northamptonshire.

³ "Item XII^o die Augusti eodem anno dominus le revers

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tions of Lord Stafford of Southwick at Bridgewater, and again that of Sir Humphrey Neville, a Lancastrian, and Charles, his brother, who had risen in rebellion in September, in the "north coasts," and that of the bailiff of Durham at the same time ("et ballivus de Duram eodem tempore"). It was on the occasion of this northern or Lancastrian rising that the Nevilles found themselves forced to release Edward; for the unpopular ministers having been brought to justice, there was a feeling abroad that the King should be set free.

So far Warwick's revolt had been successful, but it did not wholly gratify his ambition. No doubt he felt that the King was hopelessly alienated, and, whenever powerful enough, would free himself from the influence of the house of Neville. Fresh troubles broke out, this time in Lincolnshire, in February 1470. Warwick's agents so worked on the fears of the people that they rose in great numbers, and converted a local dispute into a rising of some magnitude. A royal missive, bearing date February 9, arrived at Coventry late in the evening, and in accordance with the commission, money was collected throughout the wards for men to go to Grantham by March 12.¹ The King's letter was imperative; there were rebels abroad, it said, "and many assemble for the retaining of the said enemies . . . so that if their malice be not . . . withstanden, it might grow to the great jeopardy of us and to the destruction of all true subjects." Edward defeated the rebels at Empingham, near Stamford, on 12th March, and so sudden was their flight that the battle received the name of *Lose-coat Field*. Meanwhile the ringleaders, mainly belonging to the Welles family, were brought in; but before

(Lord Rivers), tunc thesaurarius Anglie, fuit decollatus apud Gosford grene, et dominus Johannes Wodvyle, filius ejus, similiter" (*Lect Book*, 346).

¹ *Leet Book*, 354.

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execution they showed that Clarence and Warwick were seriously implicated in their designs. Edward, whose suspicions were thoroughly aroused, sent to the duke and earl at Coventry, bidding them disband their levies, for they were followed by a great number of men, and join him without delay ; but they would not, merely sending excuses and promises.¹ And perhaps it was then that Clarence, being in need of money, left in pledge a "coronall," garnished with "rubies, diamonds, and sapphires," in return for a loan of 300 marks from the citizens.² Finally Warwick and the King's brother, after trying the disposition of men's minds towards their cause in the northern parts, turned southwards, whither Edward followed them ; but they had already taken ship at Dartmouth when the King reached Exeter. Edward passed through Coventry on his way southwards, and forty men went with the King on April 5 to the south coasts, taking the great sum of 12d.³ a day for payment. For the citizens of Coventry—provident men—afforded help to either party, hoping surely to have their reward whichever side might prevail in the end. They admitted Clarence and Edward, and furnished the former with money and the latter with men. This shows either that they took a dispassionate view of these dynastic and political struggles in which they had no concern, or that they were more deeply involved in them than we imagine, but parties being so evenly balanced in the city, the presence or near neighbourhood of a leader of either party was sufficient for the time being to turn the scale in his favour.

The two conspirators sailed for Calais, but there the

¹ Ramsay, ii. 350.

² Corp. MS. ; see below, p. 152.

³ *Leet Book*, 355. Troops went from Coventry to support Edward in 1469 and 1470. On both these occasions the men took 12d. a day. But the next year, when the Lancastrians were ruling and a war with Burgundy was in prospect, only 6d. a day was given to the soldiers. Was the Lancastrian cause and war with Burgundy popular then?

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merchants of the Staple were heart and soul for Edward and the Burgundian alliance, and the garrison, being in their pay, closed the harbour against them. So they put into the Seine, and Warwick, abandoning his old project of dethroning Edward to make room for Clarence, prepared to take up a more definite policy, and made overtures to the Lancastrians. It is difficult to imagine how Queen Margaret could bring herself to forgive the man who had wrought so much evil to her and hers. But Louis XI., King of France, who knew that if the Yorkists continued to reign they would strengthen Burgundy, his great foe, acted as peacemaker, and the compact between Lancaster and Neville was sealed by the betrothal of Warwick's daughter to the Prince of Wales. When the King-maker and the Lancastrian lords landed at Plymouth in September, they caught Edward unawares in the north, and they replied to his summons, ordering them to appear at court, "humbly and measurably accompanied," by proclaiming Henry VI. King of England. The army in the north declared for King Henry; for the moment the game was up; Edward IV. fled to Lynn, and took ship for the Low Countries.

The Coventry *Leet Book* thus summarizes the year's events:¹ "In the Lenton when William Stafford was mayor . . . the Lord Wellys² were byhedyd. The duke of Clarance and the yrlle of Warw[ick] w[ent] o[ut] of the londe, and went to the kyng off Franse, and there were gretly cheryshyd, and there was a m[arriage] m[ade] by twix prinse Edward and a dohghter of the sayd yrlle of Warwic. And in the monthe of Sept[ember] the sayd duke and yrlle with the yrlle of Oxyngford, the yrlle off Pembroke,³ brother to

¹ The square brackets enclose words which are missing in the MS. The records were hastily written at the time, and are much mutilated (*Leet Book*, 358).

² Welles, leader of the revolt in Lincolnshire.

³ Jasper Tudor, half-brother to Henry VI.

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kyng Harry, the bastard ffawkynbruge¹ comyn a londe at Ex—.² They ther drewe to hem muche pepull, or they com to Coventry, they wer xxx thowsand. [Ky]ng Edward laye at Notynham, and sende for lordes and all other men, but ther com so lytell pep[ull] to hym that he was not abyll to made a fylde a gaynes



OLD HOUSE IN LITTLE PARK STREET

hem, and then he with the yrlle [R]evers, the lorde Hastyng,³ the lord Haward, and the lorde Say went to Lynne, and ther goten hem shippes, and sayledon to the duke of Borgoyne,⁴ the whiche duke hade weddyd

¹ Thomas Neville, natural son of Lord Fauconberg.

² Query? They landed at Dartmouth and Plymouth.

³ Hastings.

⁴ Burgundy.

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kyng Edwards syster, the lady Margete. And then the duke of Clarans, the yrle off Warwic, the yrle of Oxynford, the yrle of Shroysbere, the lord Stanley, [and] the bysshoppe of Yorke¹ went to the towre at London, and set out of prison kyng Harre the Syxt, the wyche hade be ix yer and a halfe and mor² as a prisonere, and brohgt hym to the bysshoppes palys at Powllys³ in London, and made hym there to take on hym to be kyng as he was afore tyme. And then was the yrle of Wyrseter⁴ behedyt at London. . . . The quene that was wyfe to kyng Edward, with hyr moder, the duches of Bedford,⁵ toke seynt wary⁶ at Westminster, and ther the quene was lyght of a son that was crystonyd Edward.”

So the year that had seen such astonishing events now drew to a close. England saw one king displaced by a powerful subject after a bloodless struggle, and another, weak, possibly imbecile, and long a neglected prisoner, restored to his former state; a queen driven to take sanctuary for fear of her husband's enemies, and the birth of a Prince of Wales, the history of whose short unhappy life accords well with the inauspicious season of his coming into the world. Though Englishmen passively accepted these changes, Warwick's position was still one of great difficulty; the King's weakness, Margaret's delay in France, and last the unstable temper of “false, fleeting, perjured Clarence,” all combined to make the firm establishment of the restored dynasty a matter involving risk on every hand.

John Bette counted the beginning of his mayoralty in

¹ Archbishop Neville.

² Not quite correct. Henry VI. was taken by the Yorkists, July 1465. Hence he had only been in prison five years.

³ S. Paul's.

⁴ Tiptoft, Earl of Worcester, the “Butcher,” beheaded October 18, at Tower Hill.

⁵ Widow, first of the Duke of Bedford, and then of Lord Rivers.

⁶ Sanctuary.

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January, 1471, according to the regnal year of Henry VI., and the townspeople doubtless considered that the rule of the Yorkists was a thing of the past.¹ Perhaps the craftsmen party were pleased with the reversal of policy which followed on the reaccession of the Lancastrian King. The French King held Warwick to an agreement to make war with Burgundy. And war with Burgundy meant interruption in the Flemish wool trade, and a plentiful supply of wool for the home market. In the following March, forty men, now waged at 6d. a day, were commissioned to go for two months to Flanders. But the Flemings, by their support of the fugitive King, Edward IV., carried the war into the enemy's country. On March 14, 1471, Edward landed at Ravenspur, to claim—so he averred—the duchy of York, his ancestral inheritance. Slipping past Montagu, who had been set to guard the north road, he pressed on towards the Midlands. Followers presently flocked to his standard, and on March 29, coming from Leicester, he offered battle beneath the walls of Coventry. Warwick, who lay within the city, waiting for fresh levies, had not troops sufficient to accept the challenge, and suffered Edward to pass on, and cut off his communications with London.

The citizens of Coventry must have long remembered this terrible season, "the Lenton next afore Barnet ffield," and the hurried and almost unintelligible writing of the *Leet Book*, with the frequent and probably intentional mutilation of its pages, bespeak the agitation and confusion which filled men's thoughts. There could be no temporizing now the great earl was within their gates, no making overtures to the returning Yorkists, who, now that there was no army barring the way to the capital, found their position greatly increased in strength. The townsfolk lent Warwick 100 marks,² and during that period of terrible anxiety, wherein the earl was waiting for the levies under Montagu from the

¹ *Leet Book*, 362.

² *Ib.*, 364.

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north, Oxford from the east, and Clarence from the south-west, they sent "riders into the country" to bring back tidings, and having fortified their city, kept a strict watch.¹ The levies under Clarence never came to the earl's aid, for meeting Edward on the road between Warwick and Banbury, the duke deserted the cause of his father-in-law, and was "right lovingly reconciled" to Edward. Afterwards Clarence, stung perhaps with remorse at his desertion, sent unto the earl "to require him to take some good way with king Edward"² . . . the earle (after he had patientlie heard the duke's message) he seemed greatlie to abhorre his unfaithfull dealing. . . . To the messengers (as some write) he gave none other answer but this: that he had rather be like himselfe than like a false and perjured duke; and that he was fullie determined never to leave warre till he had either lost his owne life or utterlie subdued his enimies."

Strengthened by Clarence's levies, the King again returned to offer battle on April 5 before the gates of Coventry, but as Warwick still refused, he drew off down the Watling Street towards London. The citizens of Coventry continued faithful to Warwick, and when he left for the capital to stake his all on a battle with Edward, twenty horsemen and twenty foot from the city set forth with him on the eventful march, and fought at Barnet Field. But when the battle was over the terror-stricken townsmen would fain—in Clarence's words—have "made so good a way with king Edward," and did all that in them lay to appease the conqueror. Margaret of Anjou and her son had landed two days after the battle. Prince Edward no doubt expected aid from the Lancastrian stronghold, and sent a proclamation from Chard, where he then was, to Coventry. But the townfolk knew that the day was with the Yorkist King.

¹ *Leet Book*, 366. 33s. was paid to gunners, to "riders in the country and watchmen."

² *Holinshed*, iii. 682.

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The *Leet Book* records the receipt of “a letter fro Edward, the son of Harry the VI^{te}, the xxv day of Aprile, that was wryton at Cherd the xviii day of Aprile *the whyche was sent to Kyng Edward and the messenger therewith to Abyndon.*”¹ But they were not allowed to make their peace after this easy fashion. In May Edward came to Coventry, deprived the mayor, John Bette, of the civic sword, and confiscated the liberties of the city, which were only redeemed by a payment of 500 marks.² The citizens owed even this grace to Clarence’s mediation. They received a charter of pardon “for the hevy greffe that our sovereign lord beer to the citee . . . ffor the tyme that Richard, late Erle of Warwyke, with oder to hym then acompanyed, kept the citee in defence agenst his Royall highnes in the Lenton next afore Barnett ffeld.”³ Clarence’s mediation and the king’s pardon cost the citizens a further sacrifice. Edward brought his influence to bear upon them for the release of the jewel, which the duke’s necessities had induced him to leave in pledge, in return for the loan of 300 marks. This “coronall,” the deed declares, “had been utterly forfeit for two years past,” as the duke had not discharged the debt. But as Clarence had “laboured to be good lord” unto the citizens, the mayor agreed to remit a portion of the money owing, and to deliver up the jewel “for the singular pleasure and good grace of our sovereign lord, king Edward.”⁴

The reconciliation being accomplished, the citizens were eager to show their entire loyalty to King Edward, and accordingly granted a most splendid reception—

¹ *Leet Book*, 367.

² Dugdale, i. 143. In the *Leet Book* (370-1) there is the record of a collection evidently made for this fine.

³ *Leet Book*, 381.

⁴ Corp. MS. (Not in Mr. J. C. Jeaffreson’s catalogue.) See also *Leet Book*, 381.

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equal to that given to Margaret eighteen years before—to the four-year-old prince of Wales on his visit to Coventry (April 1474) for S. George's feast. The mayor and divers of the commonalty, arrayed in green and blue, met the prince with the gift of 100 marks in a gilt "cuppe" upon which was a "kerchief of plesaunce." At the Bablake gate stood a pageant, with figures of Richard II. and many nobles thereupon. The character of King Richard II. in allusion to the York genealogy, saluted the child, "of the right lyne of royall blode" with a verse of greeting. There were further pageants "with mynstralcy of harpe and dowsmeris" (dulcimers); and at the Broadgate stood S. Edward (who had done duty on a previous occasion) with "mynstralcy of harpe & lute," and more verses with allusions to the prince's father's "imperial right," wherefrom he "had been excluded by full furious intent," by way of welcome.

What wonderful memories these local poets possessed! Their verses show how the old friendship of the city to Lancaster had wholly escaped their remembrance! When the little prince rode in his "chare" down to the Cheaping, he beheld three prophets at the Cross, and above were "Childer of Issarell" (the Innocents) casting down flowers and cakes, and four pipes running wine. The three kings of Colen (Cologne) were also pressed into the service; but the great feature of the show was the pageant of S. George upon the conduit of the Cheaping, the saint being represented armed, "and a kynges daughter knelyng a fore hym with a lambe, and the father & the moder beyng in a toure a boven, beholdyng Seint George savyng their daughter from the dragon."

"O myghty God, our all socour celestiall,
Wich this royme hast geven to dower,
To thi moder, and to me, George, proteccion perpetuall,
Hit to defende from enymies fflere and nere,

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And as this mayden defended was here,
Bi thy grace from this Dragon devour,
So, Lorde, preserve this noble prynce and ever be his socour.”¹

A truly splendid reception for such a young child, who, we will hope, appreciated the “kerchief of plesaunce,” if the drift of the political allusions was above his understanding. True to his policy of ingratiating himself with the burghers and moneyed classes, the King allowed his little son to stand godfather to the mayor’s child on this occasion. Nevertheless Edward was not content with mere compliments or protestations of loyalty from the lips of actors, but made this visit of his son an opportunity for strengthening his political position. The mayor and his brethren were called upon to cause the commons of the city to swear an oath of allegiance to the Prince of Wales.² After this the King and Elizabeth Woodville were all graciousness to the citizens. The Queen in September of that year sent twelve bucks from Fakenham Forest as a present to the mayor, his brethren and their wives.³ She also praised their “sadde polit[y], guydyng and diligence” in appeasing an affray, and thanked them warmly for their duties . . . “by you largely shewed vnto vs and to our derrest son the prince; and in like wyse to all oure childern ther in sundry wises heretofore, and namely vnto our right dere son, the Duc of York, in this time of our absens.”⁴ Four years later, Edward sent the prince of Wales with his court to Cheylesmore, where the child sojourned for some time, and was admitted a member of the Trinity and Corpus Christi guilds.⁵

But the fair words of royalty often bore a most un-

¹ *Leet Book*, 393. It must be remembered that S. George, according to legend, was born at Coventry. See *Seven Champions*. S. George’s day is April 23. All the characters of the pageant are taken from the shearmen and tailors’ play. See below, chap. xv.

² *Leet Book*, 393.

⁴ *Ib.*, 407.

³ *Ib.*, 405.

⁵ Harl. MS. 6,388 f. 23.

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welcome meaning, and the yoke of the Yorkists was not light. Edward, in 1474, applied to "his feythful subgetts" in the city of their "benevolence" to aid him with a substantial sum of money for various undertakings incident to a war with France.¹ The king found "benevolences" or forced loans more convenient than subsidies granted by parliament, and in the wars a treaty better served his purpose than a battle, when the French king was willing to pay for peace. The frequent interference of the Prince of Wales's council in city disputes at first ruffled the tempers of the great folk at Coventry not a little. "We, your humble and true servants here," the corporation wrote to the Prince of Wales in 1480, "know of no variance . . . here but that we among ourselves, be the grace of God shall amicably and righteously settle." But all thoughts of resistance had been abandoned, when the next year a commotion, raised by the common folk at the enclosure of the Lammis pastures, put the franchises in danger of confiscation a second time, and the corporation earnestly entreated the Prince of Wales by intercession to avert his father's wrath.

Richard III., in his brief reign, did all that in him lay to conciliate the Coventry folk; in 1485 he kept Whitsuntide at Kenilworth,² and paid a visit to the city to witness the Corpus Christi pageants, but we hear of no joyous welcome given him by the citizens. Perhaps—though there was little sentiment in contemporary politics—they could not lightly forget the faces of the two little boys, who had visited the city during their father's lifetime, and had since mysteriously disappeared, men knew not by what means, in the Tower of London. In an interesting letter written probably in the previous year, the King charges the authorities of this thoroughfare city to provide horses for the royal messengers.

"Forasmoche," he says, "as we have appointed and

¹ *Leet Book*, 409 sqq.

² Ramsay, ii. 535.

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ordeined certain of our servants to lye in diverse places and townes betwix us and the west parties of this our royaume for the hasty conveyance of tydings and of all other things for us necessarie to have knowledge of, we therefore wol and desire and also charge you that, if any of oure seid servants comyng by you shal nede any horses for thair hasty spede to or from us, ye wil see them shortly for to be provided therof for thair redy money. And also if it fortune any of them to travell from you by nyght that than ye will see that they may have guydes and that they shalbe suffisauntly rewarded for thair labors. And that ye faile not to doo your effectual diligence herein as we trust you, and as we may undrestande the redynesse and good will that ye have to please us.”¹ There is an undertone of threat underlying these last few words, shewing may-be something of the anxiety the King felt concerning the loyalty of the citizens. But the inhabitants were decidedly worth conciliating, and Richard wrote very cordially in the last year of his reign praising the “sadness and circumspect wisdoms” of the mayor and his brethren in allaying debate, and acknowledging their “auctorite to provide, make and establishe ordenaunces and rules . . . for the vniversall wele and pollitique guiding of” the said city.²

It seems that this cordiality was wasted on the men of Coventry, so gladly did they welcome King Richard’s rival, the victor of Bosworth, when he took up his lodging at the Bull, in Smithford Street, after the battle.³ The wardens’ accounts record payments made “for brede, ale and wyn and other vitailles that was hadde to Maister Onleys, he then beyng mair, at the comyng of Kyng Henre,” the most expensive items of the account being

¹ Corp. MS. A. 79, i. 8. Written from Burton Monastery, April 2.

² *Leet Book*, 523-4.

³ Fretton, *Mayors of Coventry*, 12. They presented him with £100 and a cup.

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“i pype claret wyn iii li., i pype redde wyn iii li.,” with “xx motons,” “ii oxen,” and 7 “stockfishes,” the price of which made a total of £4, 13s. 6d. It is true that the citizens, with their old supreme indifference to political party, also supplied bread and ale “to the feld of Kyng Richard,”¹ and one of their number fought, we know not on which side, at Bosworth, for the accounts record that 2s. 6d. was paid by the Corpus Christi guild “towards the hurt that Thomas Maideford had in the fylde.” Two years after Henry kept S. George’s feast at Coventry, and also, like his predecessor, saw on S. Peter’s day later on in the year (June 29) a performance of the famous mystery plays.

A great council was held at this time in the city, and the Archbishop of Canterbury and other bishops read in the minster the papal bulls, affirming Henry’s right of succession, and threatening with excommunication all such as should rebel against him.² The King was still at Coventry when he heard that the Earl of Lincoln, a Yorkist, with help from Burgundy, had landed in Lancashire to support the claim of Lambert Simnel, whom historians call “the organ-maker’s son,” but who gave himself out to be the son of the duke of Clarence. After the defeat of the rebels at Stoke, near Newark, Simnel, as all the world knows, became a scullion in the royal kitchen. The annals record that another pretender, Thomas Harrington, who also called himself the son of Clarence, was beheaded in this year “on the cunduit by the Bull,” and was buried at the Grey Friars’.³ At the King’s second visit at S. Peter’s-tide he lodged with Robert Onley, who had been mayor when the battle of Bosworth was fought, and conferred on him the honour of knighthood.⁴ After Simnel’s rising had been crushed,

¹ *Leet Book*, 530-2. It is not quite certain that the words are to be understood as implying that the citizens fed Richard’s soldiers.

² Gardiner, *Henry VII.*, 53.

³ Harl. MS. 6,388, f. 24.

⁴ *Ib.*

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the good folk no doubt expected to enjoy an era of peace, and in the following year the churchwardens of S. Michael's, and other well-disposed people, "for joy brought to S. Michael's a great bell, and called it Jesus Bell."

Lollardry had never died out, and it flamed up anew when the land was at peace. In 1485 Foxe records that various people of Coventry were "troubled for religion," and compelled to recant, though not without injunction to penance.¹ The annals tell us they bore faggots about the city on the market day, the dread of fire being no doubt more convincing to the suspected heretics than the bishop's logic. But in the next generation both men and women had strength to endure to the end. In 1511 Bishop Blythe held a "Court of Heresy" at Maxstoke, but the accused saved themselves by abjuration, and went through the form of bearing faggots throughout the city. All were not thus to be delivered, however, and a persistent heretic, Joan Ward, who had performed this penance, was handed over to the secular arm to be burned. Seven suffered in the Little Park at Coventry this year (1512), say the city annals (differing in date from that given by Foxe in his account of the "Seven Godly Martyrs burnt at Coventry"), but one, who was not staunch enough for martyrdom, recanted, and did penance "on a pipe head," holding a faggot on his shoulder while his comrades were burning.²

Henry's frequent appeals for money must have somewhat lessened the good-will the Coventry men bore him for his frequent visits³ and complimentary membership of the city guilds. It was in 1500 that he and his Queen became a brother and sister of the Trinity fraternity.

¹ Foxe, *Martyrs* (1823), xxxix.

² Harl. MS. 6,388, f. 28. The more probable date is 1519 or 1520. In 1521, the next year, one Robert Silkeb was taken and burnt for not believing in transubstantiation (*Ib.*).

³ He twice visited the city to see the Corpus Christi plays (Sharp, *Mysteries*, 5).

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Echoes reach us of the wars he undertook, which after vast preparations and much ingathering of money, usually ended in a truce or peace. We hear of the depredations of the King of Scots, who in 1496 broke the truce, crossed the border, and after doing all "the harme and crueltee to men, woman, and children . . . that he coulde to th'uttermuch of his power," returned in great haste over Tweed, a crossing which occupied him but six or seven hours, whereas in coming over the river two whole days had been taken up.¹ The insult was to be avenged, and two of the most expert men of the city were summoned to meet at a great council to confer upon this matter. The conference naturally ended in a demand for a loan. Henry had in Richard Empson, who succeeded Boteler in the recorder's office, a servant well able to aid him in extorting money from his loyal Coventry subjects. No doubt the citizens were most unwilling to part with their substance. One Richard Smith, by an appeal to the King's "ffader of Derby," the husband of Lady Margaret, and by his "importune and dissimuled sute," managed to gain an abatement of the sum he had originally agreed on, so that others of the city who knew of Smith's wealth were "greatly discouraged" at the inequality of the assessment. Empson was to proceed, said King Henry, as he thought fit, an injunction which may be construed to mean that he was to get all the money he could out of Richard Smith for the King's use.²

Yet the citizens prospered no doubt under Henry's firm and sagacious rule, and when they recorded his death chronicler-fashion in the *Leet Book*, it is with some appearance of regret. In "this year," the account begins, "dyed king Henry the VIIth, the xxii day of April, . . . at Rychemount . . . and was brought to London in to Pollys³ with many nobles of the

¹ Corp. MS. A. 79, f. 17.

² Corp. MS. A. 79, f. 20.

³ S. Paul's.

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realme and grete nombre of torches, and a grete nombre of peple both on horsbak and a fote. And after iii dayes beying in Pollys he was brought to Westmynster, and ther he lieth and his quene Elizabeth with him in a newe chapell, which he causid to be made in his lyffe, on whoos saule Jhesu have mercy. And his son kyng Henry the VIIIth was crownyd the same yere at Westmynster the Sondag next after Midsomer day.”¹

If the father had chastised the men of Coventry with whips, the son was to chastise them with scorpions. Loans and subsidies were the order of the day, for the great treasure gathered together by Henry VII. was quickly dissipated by his successor. In 1524 a hundred and ninety-four persons advanced to Henry a hundred and fifty pounds eleven shillings by way of loan,² and this is only a single example of what was then a very common arrangement. But the citizens could ill bear the pressure of increased taxation. For some time their prosperity had been waning, for foreign competition had begun to tell upon the English cloth manufacture.³ Discontent and divisions were rife among them as in the preceding century. During years of dearth the common lands had been ploughed up, and when the dearth was over—when, “thanks be now to almighty God,” as the *Leet Book* says, “corn is comen to good plente and to easy and reasonable price,” the ploughing was still continued, and the cattle of the common folk deprived of pasture.

In 1525 the citizens rose, after their old practice, to resist the enclosure of the common lands. On “Ill Lammas Day,” say the annals, “. . . the commons of Coventre rose and pulled down the gates and hedges

¹ *Leet Book*, 625-6,

² Corp. MS. B. 60.

³ In Henry VIII.'s reign the woollen manufacture of Norwich was at a low ebb; the principal cause of this was the manufacture abroad, which led to the export of the raw material to Flanders (Burnley, *Hist. of Wool and Wool Combing*, 66-7).

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of the grounds inclosed, and they that were in the cittie shutt the Newgate against the chamberlain and their company. The mayor was almost smothered in the throng; he held with the commons, for which he was carried as prisoner to London; he was put out of his office and Mr. John Humphrey served out his year." A special commission under the Marquis of Dorset was appointed to try the rioters. Thirty-seven prisoners were sent to Warwick and Kenilworth Castles, and seven to the Marshalsea.¹ Some suffered at the pillory, others after long imprisonment were pardoned by the King on the occasion of the Pope's jubilee.² But the rulers of the city were highly unpopular, and frequent "slanders" were proclaimed against them.³

The annals record the discovery of the wildest schemes, which sprang, no doubt, from the misery of the people. In 1523 two men, Pratt and Sloth, were arrested in Coventry on the charge of treason. They confessed that their purpose was to kill the mayor and his brethren, rob S. Mary's Hall, where the common chest was kept, and take Kenilworth Castle. They were taken to London for judgment, but executed at Coventry, and their remains figured on the city gates.⁴ The next year a further scheme came to light. This time the King's subsidy was the object at which the plunderers aimed; it was to be stolen from the collectors on the highway to London; the conspirators proposed to seize Kenilworth Castle and to fight there for their lives. These men, Phillips, a schoolmaster, Pickering, clerk of the King's larder, and Anthony Manville, gentleman, were hanged, drawn and quartered at Tyburn.⁵

The "King's Proceedings" of 1536 undoubtedly intensified the misery of the citizens. The monastery was dissolved by the royal commissioners; the cathedral church defaced and its roof pulled off, and the lead,

¹ Harl. MS. 6,388, f. 30.

² Corp. MS. A. 79, f. 27.

³ *Ib.*, f. 28.

⁴ Harl. MS. 6,388, f. 29a.

⁵ *Ib.*

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worth £647, stacked within the desecrated building;¹ the house of the Franciscans razed “because the poor people lay so sore upon it;² and all monastic property seized into the King’s hand.” Dugdale, quoting Hales’ letter to the Protector Somerset, attributes to the dissolution the state of decay and misery into which the city had fallen in the third year of Edward VI. “There were not at that time,” the letter runs, “more than 3,000 inhabitants, whereas within memory there had been 15,000.”³ It is very doubtful whether the high figure is correct, and certainly the population never sank to so low as 3,000. In a petition coming from the people of Coventry in 1548 it is stated that there were “to the number of eleven to twelve thousand housling people”⁴ within the city. But it was the sweeping and iniquitous act of confiscation, known as the suppression of the guilds and chantries, rather than the dissolution of the monasteries, which brought the citizens to the verge of ruin. So extensive was the house property belonging to the guilds, and so intimately were these bodies connected with the corporation, that this calamity involved the city finances in the most terrible confusion. Having no property from which to draw the money for the annual fee-ferm of £50, one or two persons, the citizens declared to the Earl of Warwick, were yearly ruined by the tax levied for its payment.⁵ The poorer class—of late years greatly increased in numbers—were deprived of the guild charities, the children of a schoolmaster⁶ and the less wealthy craftsmen of all hope of provision for old age and an honourable burial after death. The burgesses of Lynn and Coventry protested against the confiscation. There were but two churches in the city, the

¹ Gasquet, *Monasteries*, ii. 427. ² *Ib.* ii., 265.

³ Dugdale, *Warw.* i. 146.

⁴ Harl. MS. 6, 195, f. 7.

⁵ Vol. of correspondence, Corp. MS. A. 79, f. 63.

⁶ The schoolmaster’s salary was discharged by the Trinity guild.

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latter declared, "wherein God's service is done, whereof the one, that is to say, the church of Corpus Christi, was specially maintained of the revenues of such guild lands as had been given heretofore by divers persons to that use. . . . If therefore now by the act the same land should pass from them, it should be a manifest cause of the utter desolation of the city." For the people, the petitioners declared, "when the churches were no longer supported, nor God's service done therein, and the other uses and employments of those lands omitted, should be of force constrained to abandon the city and seek new dwelling places."¹ This energetic protest was not without its effect. The citizens were permitted to purchase back the guild lands for the sum of £1315, 1s. 8d., a very large amount in those days,² which, in spite of their poverty, they were enabled to gather together.

Once more in Mary's reign, January 31, 1554, when Coventry closed its gates against Lady Jane Grey's father, the Duke of Suffolk, the city became of strategic importance. The city failed to rise, and the Protestant cause in the midlands was for the moment lost. May be the citizens regretted their inertia in the years that followed when in 1556 Laurence Saunders and Robert Glover, martyrs, were led out to die in the Little Park. Of Glover, it is said that he remained "lumpish," being dull of spirit, and fearing that the Lord had withdrawn His favour from him. But a change overtook him on his way to the stake, so that he clapped his hands with joy, "seeming rather to be risen from some deadly danger to liberty and life, than as one passing out of the world by any pains of death."

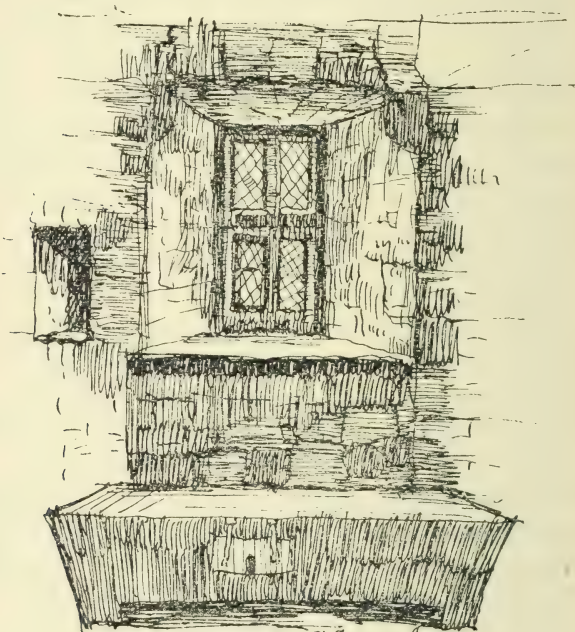
By this time a royal visit had ceased to be a political

¹ Harl. MS. 6,195, f. 7. See also Ashley, pt. ii. 148. The church referred to is the now demolished one dedicated to S. Nicholas, which was supported by the Corpus Christi guild.

² Corp. MS. B. 75.

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event, it became merely an occasion for splendour, or an act of courtesy. Elizabeth visited the city in 1565, being lodged at Mr Hales' at the Whitefriars, and was greeted with much courtier-like compliment by the recorder, but the reception given to her has none of the significance which attaches to the welcome, say, of Margaret of Anjou. Little remains of Whitefriars save



QUEEN MARY'S CHAMBER

the east wing of the cloister with its fine groined roof of the fifteenth century ; but an oriel window on the western side is still called after Queen Elizabeth. Coventry saw the great Queen's rival a few years later, when in 1569, in order to be out of reach of her confederates in the north, Mary Queen of Scots was hurriedly conveyed from Tutbury to the city, and placed under a strong guard. She was confined first in the "Bull Inn," and then in S. Mary's Hall. Some years later this Queen's

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grand-daughter, another of the fascinating, luckless Stuarts, was hurried in November 1605 from Combe Abbey to Coventry, out of reach of the plotters of the Gunpowder Treason. This was Elizabeth, later the "winter Queen" of Bohemia. She was lodged for the nonce with Mr Hopkins of Palace Yard.

The old town house of the Hopkins' family still stands in Earl Street, having undergone perhaps more vicissitudes than any other well-known house in Coventry. Once a coaching-inn, known as the "Golden Horse," and a ladies' school, kept by one Miss Sheldrake, it was originally the home of the Hopkins' family, who first appear in Coventry history in the late fifteenth century. Its best-known member, when sheriff of Coventry, suffered much by reason of his openly expressed Protestantism, and fled to Basle in Queen Mary's reign. In this house James II. held his court in 1687, and here were also lodged Princess Anne and George of Denmark. It is a beautiful old seventeenth-century quadrangle with fine exterior lead-work, containing in its upper storey, a stone chimney-piece of classic type, disfigured by a coat of paint, while its banquetting-chamber with its finely panelled plaster ceiling presents a veritable image of decay. The tombs of the family with their busts and togas, 'mid all the panoply of classic memorial and woe, appear in the Cappers' chapel of S. Michael's church.

The chief feature of the Stuart period is the strengthening of the Puritan feeling among the citizens. Either owing to the influence of the Presbyterian Cartwright, who, during his tenure of the mastership of Leicester's hospital at Warwick, established his system of church discipline among the clergy of the county, or from some hereditary instinct, which had led them to embrace Lollardism under the Lancastrians, and furnish martyrs for the faggot under the Tudors, the men of Coventry grew more Puritan year by year. They greatly vexed the

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soul of King James in 1611 by refusing to kneel in receiving the Sacrament, a circumstance the English Solomon never forgot, and ten years later he refused to grant a new charter to the city until he was certified by the bishop that the orders of the Church were complied with.¹ Nor did a lawsuit, which the Prince of Wales carried on for many years with the corporation about the rent due to him from the monastery lands as lord of Cheylesmore, improve the understanding between the people and the Stuart kings. When, however, the famous writ of ship-money was first issued in 1635, it was not against the principle, but rather against the unfair assessment of the local tax, that the men of Coventry murmured. The city, they complained, was no longer prosperous, nor was it able to pay a sum so disproportionate to that levied on the remainder of the county. Many were the journeys the diligent town clerk, Humphrey Burton, undertook ere he could get the tax lightened for the citizens.²

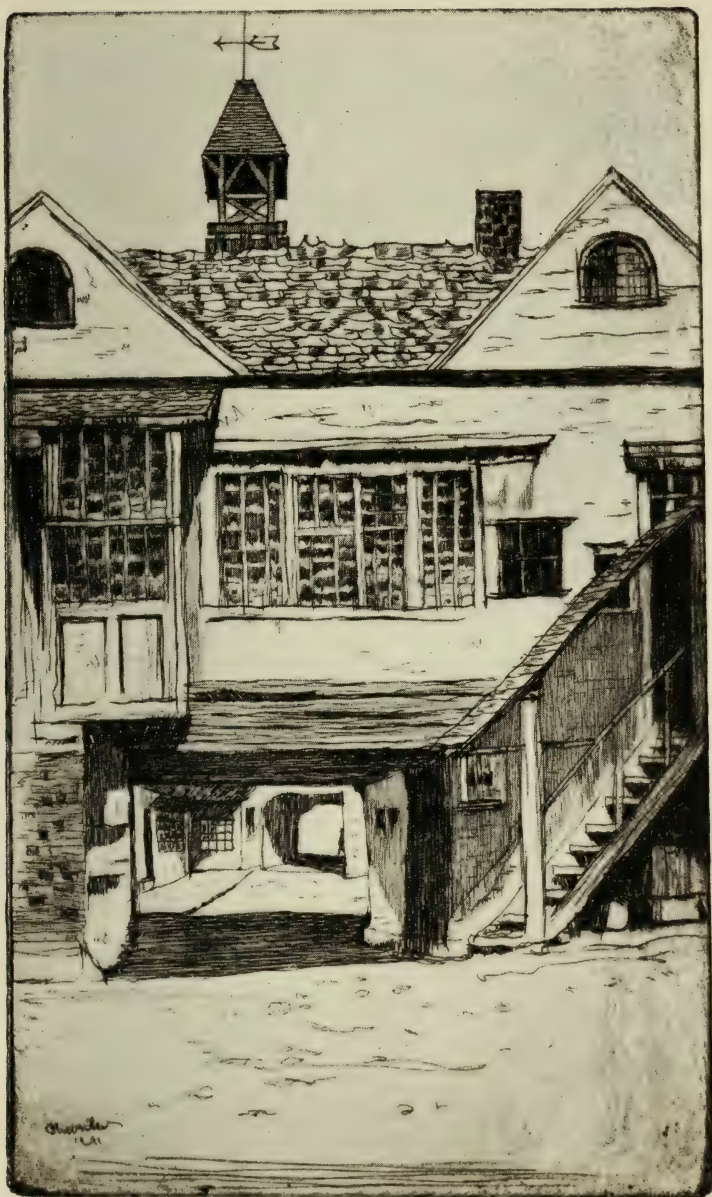
But no readjustment of the assessment of this unpopular tax could win over the hearts of the Coventry men to King Charles. And when in August 1642, a few days before the royal standard was unfurled at Nottingham, Charles appeared before the walls and summoned the people of Coventry to admit him, they refused to allow him to enter the city.³ This circumstance rankled sore in the King's mind, and it seems that the feeling was shared by his son, for when Charles II. came into his own again, he ordered that the walls of the city where his father had suffered this check should be demolished. The work of destruction, which was begun by the Earl of Northampton on July 22, 1662, occupied nearly 500 men for three weeks and three days,⁴ and when it was over the history of Coventry as a forti-

¹ Sharp, *Antiq.*, 18.

² Burton on Ship Money, Corp. MS.A. 35.

³ Poole, *Coventry*, 75.

⁴ Poole, 80.

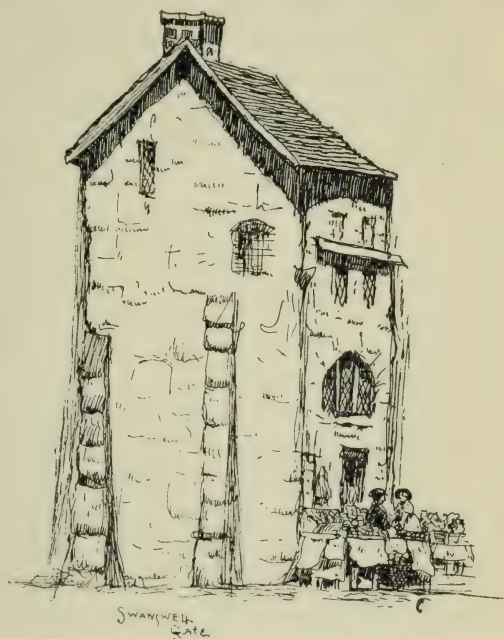


PALACE YARD

Last Struggle of York and Lancaster

fication comes to a close. Moreover, the title of the bishopric was now transposed, running henceforth not Coventry and Lichfield but Lichfield and Coventry.

King James II., who tampered here as everywhere with the civic constitution in favour of the Tories, his supporters, paid the city a peaceful visit in 1687, was lodged in Palace Yard, and touched for the evil in St. Michael's church, on which occasion "the very galleries crackt again," the throng was so great.¹ This closes the list of notable royal visits to Coventry, and the interest shifts to the varying fortunes of the citizens. Although, as compared with



London, provincial towns ceased to be great centres of trade, Coventry never gave itself wholly up to stagnation and decay, but always kept alive some sort of manufacturing activity. At first the settlement of Huguenot exiles gave an impulse to the silk industry, and for nearly two centuries the weaving of silk and ribbons was the main employment of the citizens. In the eighteenth century the manufacture of watches was introduced,² but it has been reserved for our own day to see the city again put on that busy, eager, thriving look which must have distinguished it under the later Plan-

¹ Sharp, *Antiq*, 22.

² Poole, 359-363.

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tagenets. The cycle manufacture has won back for the city some of the prosperity it once enjoyed. But nothing can bring back the pomp and grandeur and the semi-independence of mediæval times ; neither can the modern builder lend it any of the consistent beauty of the architecture of the Middle Ages. Still, unlike Abingdon, Winchester, or S. Alban's, it is a town with a present to work in, as well as a past on which to look back. As for the future, who can tell?

CHAPTER XII

The Lammas Lands

WE have passed the period wherein the men of Coventry rebelled against their overlord the prior; in the late fourteenth century we enter upon one marked by internal strife. The law passed under Edward II.,¹ forbidding victuallers to hold any municipal office was frequently evaded, and in many towns the great power of this class was a source of endless trouble. Excitements in the guild-hall when the men, whose wages were fixed at statute rate, found they would not avail to buy them proper food, the shouting of angry crowds when the chamberlains at their Lammas ride refused to pull down fences to admit the freemen's sheep and cattle as they had done in times past, must have warned the mayor and his brethren to give heed to their ways. Murmurings were heard at an early date. In 1370 the customs laid on food for the purpose of raising money for murage provoked a rising. In 1387 the townsfolk "cast their loaves at the mayor's head, because the bakers kept not the assize,"² neither did the mayor punish them according to his office, and again and again

¹ Ashley, *Econ. Hist.* i. pt. ii. 53. The act was repealed in 1511-12. In 1522 an order of leet was passed in Coventry to the effect that the mayor should warn any baker, who had offended twice against the assize, not to bake any more in the city unless he could find surety that his fault should not be repeated, and further, no victualler or butcher was allowed henceforth to be on the jury of leet (*Leet Book*, 682).

² The loaf varied in weight, but not in price, with the price of corn (Green, ii. 35).

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we hear of risings owing to that fruitful cause of trouble, the enclosure of the common lands.¹

Perhaps the townsmen were more sensitive with regard to the Lammas lands than on any other point. From time immemorial they had possessed certain rights over the common and Lammas pastures, which heretofore surrounded the city. There was still a great belt of these, about 2300 acres in extent in 1835, the commons, no doubt, representing the ancient manorial waste—Godiva's wood, two miles long and the same broad—and the Lammas and Michaelmas pastures, the manorial fields of meadow and arable, which were only free after the hay and corn harvest had been carried in. Thus, while there was on the common lands pasture for the cattle the whole year through, the citizens merely shared with various tenants or freeholders the use of Lammas and Michaelmas grounds, driving their cattle on them at certain seasons of the year, namely from Lammas (August 1) or Michaelmas (September 29) to Candlemas (February 2); during the remainder of the year the fields were in private hands. The extent of the common pastures was well known, but the peculiar tenure of the Lammas lands made it a more difficult matter to determine the exact area of pasture, held six months "in commonalty," and six "in severalty." From time to time angry disputes arose concerning the boundaries and extent of these lands, and a series of enclosures, whereof there was such bitter complaint in Warwickshire in the sixteenth century, did much to diminish the broad belt of pasture which once engirt the city. Various questions were, however, set at rest by a settlement in 1860, whereby half of the

¹ Harl. MS. 6,388 *passim*. It is difficult to determine the date of these risings, so great is the variation between the different lists of mayors; and so often do Coventry historians antedate events, owing to the confusion between the old and new styles. It is noticeable that the mayor in 1381 was Thomas Kele, one of the founders of the Trinity guild.

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Lammas pasture was made over to the various freeholders who had half-yearly rights over them, and the remaining portion, held in trust for the freemen, was converted into common land for the whole year through. To this day there still remain tracts of breezy and often gorse-grown common at Hearsall, Stivichall, Whitley, Stoke, and Gosford Green. These and the small triangular patch, once known as Grey Friars' Green, form considerable relics of the freemen's pastures. Held, as the common report went, by the commonalty, "afore that any mayor or bailiff was,"¹ in other words before the incorporation of the city—these lands could not be alienated from the burghers' use without their consent.² The pastures were, however, frequently enclosed, openly for municipal purposes,³ secretly for private gain. In the latter case there was naturally no word of consulting the burghers, and although in the former the community gave their consent to the measure, formally summoned by the mayor, the whole system of enclosures was so unpopular that it bred riots and endless discontent.

The whole question can be better surveyed by examining the careers of William Bristowe and Laurence Saunders in so far as they touch the little commonwealth of the city.

Close by Whitley Bridge is a piece of meadow called

¹ Corp. MS. F. 3. It is here said that the mayor, bailiffs, and commonalty "was seized in their demesne as of fee" of the common lands in right of the community. There was much uncertainty among the lawyers of that time as to the entity possessing rights over the common lands.

² Cicely de Montalt, in her grant to the prior of the manorial "waste" attached to the Earl's-half, reserves for all cottiers their reasonable pasture (Harl. MS. 6,388, f. 2). Walter de Coventre bequeathed to his fellow-townsmen and their heirs for ever his rights of pasture for all the cattle in all his lands (*ib.*).

³ To pay for the expenses of the fee-ferm, etc. On enclosures to pay for pageants, see below.

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Alderford Piece,¹ which is still held by the owners of Whitley Abbey, although they have no other land on the Coventry side of the river Sherborne. Concerning this and sundry other meadows² a bitter feud was waged in Coventry during the fifteenth century between the family of Bristowe on the one hand, and the mayor, bailiffs, and community of the city on the other. The account of the struggle, which reveals some of the most interesting personalities in Coventry history, shows how tenacious were the memories of the commonalty where the extent of the Lammas lands was concerned, and how fierce their resentment when these suffered diminution by encroachment.

There are doubts whether William Bristowe, of Whitley, came of gentle blood, though he spoke of his manor in those parts, and wrote himself "gentilman" with the best. His father, John Bristowe, had gained his livelihood in the city as a draper, and growing in wealth and influence, became mayor in 1428,³ and later justice of the peace and master of the Trinity guild. But he left an ill name behind him, and his acts of encroachment were fruitful of many troubles both to him and his descendants.

Thinking maybe to improve his position and step into the ranks of the country gentry, John purchased an estate at Whitley, a mile or two south of the city gates. Then began those enclosures of the common pastures which were hereafter to be remembered against him. Forty years later the tale of his doings were related by the oldest of his fellow-townsmen.⁴ After "the said John Bristowe had boron office within the cite of Couentre, thynkyng that the common people of the seid

¹ I am indebted for the identification of this piece of land to Mr Beard, late town clerk of Coventry.

² The land in question stretched from Whitley brook to Baron's Field, which was enclosed in 1845 as a cemetery.

³ *Lect Book*, 113.

⁴ Corp. MS. F. 4.

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cite neither durst nor wolde contrarie his doying . . . [he] let sowe with corne dyuers landes and buttes lying in the seid comyn grounde of Couentre fastby Whitley Crosse.” But the encroachment did not go unnoticed, nor was the transgressor allowed to have his will. Whereupon, the aged citizens continued glad to remember the stalwart resistance made by a bygone generation, . . . “the seid people of Couentre put the hierdlym¹ of bestes of Couentre into the saide corne and eton hit up as corne sowen on their owen common grounde.” Nevertheless John did not amend his ways, being assured his good friends, the mayor and corporation, would wink at his misdeeds. But “inordynatly be the fauor of dyuers then officers of the cite of Couentre, dyuers tymes, [he] let inclose parte of the forseid common grounde be diuers parcels, with hegges and dykes, and then aftur dyuers tymes let heire² and sowe dyuers of the same closes be hym so wrongfully inclosed, entendyng euer azeyns all good consiens for his singler avayle³ to approwe hym⁴ of parte of the seid common grounde, so that be suche coutynuaunce hit myght be called his owne lande, wher in trouthe he had neuer right, title, nor other possession therin.”

But this was not the least of John Bristowe’s encroachments. He laid claim to share with the freemen of Coventry the rights of pasture on the side of Whitley brook nearest to the city, a claim no lord of Whitley had heretofore advanced. But he met with a second check. “Whiche wrong, when the people of Couentre understode hit, they pynned⁵ the bestes of the seid John Bristowe at Couentre. Wheruppon the same John made amendes for the seid wrong, and never aftur wolde suffer his cattel occupying at Whitley to passe ouer the seid broke toward Couentre be his will.” But after his death, when his son William entered into the inheritance,

¹ An obscure word. ² Ear=plough. ³ Individual profit.

⁴ Get possession of. ⁵ Put in the pound.

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either the relaxation of the citizens' vigilance or the warm friendliness of men in high places enabled the new lord of Whitley to drive his tenants' cattle across the brook, the natural boundary between the pasturage of the folk of the hamlet of Whitley and the city of Coventry. Moreover the meadows between Baron's Field and Whitley brook were kept several. The citizens did not, however, forget these encroachments, though, for many years, custom sanctioned the double wrong.

The fruit of these evil dealings was seen in the year 1469; a troubled one for Coventry. The mayor, William Saunders, a dyer, one of a craft which had often been, and was again often to be, at variance with the corporation, seems to have had leanings towards the popular side. Wars and rumours of wars brought some distress upon the city, and the mayor gave £5 "in relesynge of pore men that shuld have bor her part" towards defraying the cost "for fifty men to go to York to the king against Robin of Redesdale," for Warwick's party were rising in rebellion, and the soldiers, weary of war, demanded the unheard of sum of 10d. a day as payment. Financial difficulties also beset the corporation. The ferm, as we have seen, had in the previous year fallen greatly into arrears; but the trouble concerning the Lammas lands was to dwarf by comparison all the rest.

It was at this time that William Bristowe by his own deed brought down upon himself the anger of the corporation. From a house in the West Orchard he built a wall, which was found to encroach "by a foot or more" upon the common river; wherefore "it was taken up again." Indignant at this usage, Bristowe brought an action for trespass in the county court against the mayor and community. This was an unwise step on his part, for the corporation at once "remembered," the *Leet Book*¹ says with unconscious irony, "that he

¹ *Leet Book*, 349.



COUNCIL CHAMBER, SHOWING PANELLING

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was suffered to overlay the common betwixt Whitley and Coventry, and had no common there." In other words, Bristowe had continued to tread in his father's footsteps. They resolved forthwith that this should not be suffered to continue. On the eve of S. Andrew, before Sir John Nedom, knight and justice, they demanded what evidence Bristowe could put forth in support of his claim; and heard the testimony of "agyt" men concerning the impounding of his father's cattle in former days when they had been found in the Coventry pastures. While matters were in debate the other encroachment of this family was brought forward. Men told one another how John Bristowe had, by "dyking and hedging," enclosed "divers parcels" of the common pasture by the water at Whitley, and how the father and son had kept these meadows several ever since.

For once corporation and "commonalty" were of one mind as regards the question of the Lammas lands. It was resolved that John Bristowe's work should be undone. So on the Monday after S. Andrew's day the mayor and divers citizens—such is the account of the affair Bristowe gave in his petition to Edward IV. in the following year¹—"stered, provokyd and comaundyed mony and dyuers rotys personys . . . to the number of vc (500) personys and mooe . . . [who] in manere of warre arrayed, that is for to say [with] byllys, launcegayes, jakkys, salettys, bowes, arrowes, and with mottokys and spadeys, sholles and axes," with evil intent came to Bristowe's fields. Here they went to work, and "caste down his gatys and his dyches, cutte down his hegeys and his trees . . . and mony grete okeys beyng growyng in the hegeys and dyches of the age of c years and more," carrying away wood, clay and gravel, and "riotously" destroying two "swaneys ereyrs" (nests). The trespassers would even have

¹ Corp. MS. F. 3.

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pulled down the petitioner's mills had not one of his servants induced them to desist by meeting them with a certain money "by way of a fine." And afterwards, Bristowe continued, with a touch of bitterness at this last indignity, "William Pere, oon of the aldermen of the same cite, by the commaundment of the seid late mayre and Richard Braytoft, browght with hym the wayteys of the same cite to the seid riotours in reresyng¹ of their seid rioteys, and like as the[y] hade doon a grete conquest or victori, . . . made theym pype and synge before the said riotours all the weye . . . to the seid cite, which ys by space of a myle largele or more." And that day, the petition goes on yet more bitterly, "these men were in the tavern setting, avauntyng and reresyng of their gret riotes, saying that if your seid besecher² sueyd any persone . . . for that cause by the course of your laweys, that they wold slee³ hym." In this manner, with tossing of tankards and playing of pipes, the meadows and arable lands at Whitley were thrown open to the community at S. Andrew's tide in the year of grace 1469.

William Saunders, the mayor, found the commonalty apt pupils in learning to resent old encroachments; but the pupils soon grew too strong for the master's hand. A fresh trouble arose after Bristowe's claims had been disposed of. The Prior's Waste was held by the convent, but the community was possessed of a somewhat doubtful title to the pasturage of the same. On S. Nicholas' day the people broke out into open riot, threw down hedges round about the Waste and those of other gardens belonging to the convent. The prior professed to be "greatly aggrieved," and proposed to "trouble" the city no doubt with a lawsuit.⁴ But the mayor, perceiving perhaps that the matter was one of great difficulty, entreated him to come to terms,

¹ *i.e.* rehearsing.

³ *i.e.* slay.

² *i.e.* petitioner.

⁴ *Leet Book*, 350.

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and finally granted him as compensation the Waste and a piece of land without the New Gate "to be kept several for evermore." These enclosures were the beginning of troubles. A body of 216 men had approved of this measure, but they were, very likely, selected with a special view to obtaining this approval, as the names of sixty-five of them can be identified with those of past or future municipal officers. At least the common people did not approve of the step. They refused to relinquish their ancient rights over the Prior's Waste and the close by the New Gate, though the leet forbade them to break open the meadows reserved for the prior's use.¹

But Bristowe did not tamely endure to be cut off from his supposed inheritance. The following year he appealed to the privy council to redress his wrongs; and Saunders, the late mayor, Pere, and another citizen who had been prominent in the affair of the preceding year, were summoned before the council to answer for the matters laid to their charge.

The late mayor and his assistants scornfully denied the bulk of Bristowe's accusation. Whitley, they averred, was no "manor," and claims such as its present owner put forward had been formerly unknown. They gently ridiculed the complaint of the damage wrought among the "gret okes," whereof none, they declared, were more than twenty years old, the value of the whole timber being but 6s. 8d.; but they were fain to admit the felling of twelve *small* trees, as well as of breaking hedges, and carrying away sundry loads of clay and gravel. But it was not on Bristowe's land, they declared, that these trespasses had been done. The land he asserted to be part of his inheritance was in reality the property of the community, and in the time of Lawrence Cook (he had succeeded Bristowe's father in the mayoralty in 1429) the corporation had held these meadows in the

¹ *Leet Book*, 375.

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community's name. And this possession dated back to the days before the city's incorporation. "The commonalty of the same city, afore that any mayor or baliff was, were seized thereof in their demesne as of fee, time that no man's mind is to the contrary."

Bristowe's second statement, or "replicacion," and Saunders' "rejoinder," were a mere tissue of mutual contradiction, and the King deputed the Prior of Maxstoke, Sir Richard Byngham, and Thomas Littleton, to inquire into the business, and "make a return under their conclusions respecting the same, in the quindene of S. Michael next coming."¹ What the end of these worthy persons' inquisition was we have no means of knowing. The matter, however, dragged on, with various appeals to justice, until April 1472.

In that year the corporation made a great effort to end the dispute. A large gathering—"these," says the *Leet Book*, giving about 120 names,² "and of other many moo"—assembled in S. Mary's Hall at the mayor's bidding; and being asked "how they wold be demened in that behalf," answered and said, "they wode abyde with the mair and his bredern to the utmost of herr goodes" in the matter; "and as the mair and his cownsaill did in the mater [would] agree thereto." Fortified by this support, the mayor and his council proceeded to seek for means of closing the quarrel by arbitration. On the Wednesday in Whitsunweek the two sheriffs offered to treat on Bristowe's behalf, their labour being undertaken, they confessed, "thorow the speceal meanes and lamentable instance of the wyffe of the seid William Bristowe."³ The mayor and council, "in order that it might not be said that they had refused a reasonable offer," ordered that bills, "endented and ensealed," should be made, setting forth the matter at variance, both parties agreeing to abide by the decision of John Catesby, sergeant-at-law, and William Cumber-

¹ Corp. MS. F. 3.

² *Leet Book*, 376 sqq.

³ *Ib.*, 378.

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ford. Moreover, a representative of the mayor and community was to be chosen to ride to London and lay the matter before the arbitrators.¹

As there were, of course, no deeds existing testifying to the rights of the community in this case, measures were taken to prepare documents. "And on the Monday next after the blessed Trinity Sunday" ² the common lands were viewed by certain great men of the neighbourhood, the Abbots of Kenilworth, Combe, Stoneley, and Merevale, Sir Simon Mountford of Coleshill, Sir Robert Strelley, and William Hugford of Emscote. These, then, had an "examination" of certain of the oldest men of the city. "The whyche old men all and everych of them by himself deposed and swar openly uppon a boke" that the land in question was "common to the commonalty."³ There was then a "letter testimonial" made to this effect, to which all the worshipful men and these great folk affixed their seals.

The thirty old men—their ages ranged from forty years "and more" to fourscore ⁴—were much impressed with the solemnity of the occasion. "In alsmoche," their "letter testimonial" runs, "as for oure gret ages be liklyhode wee may not long abyde in this erthely lyfe, and we knowe verely that hit is medefull to our soweles to witnesse thynges that be true and in oure knowlech, callyng to our remembraunce the unlawefull and wilfull troble whiche William Bristowe dothe azeyns the maire and commonalte of Couentre, claymyng the common ground that lieth betwyxt Baronsfelde ⁵ withoute the Newe Yate under the kynges park, stretchyng to Whitleybroke, called Shirburne," they affirmed that his

¹ *Leet Book*, 379-80.

² *Ib.*, 380.

³ Corp. MS. F. 4.

⁴ See Green, *Town Life*, ii. 315, for a similar case at Southampton. Here one "ancient" man was aged 104 years and more.

⁵ Baron's Field is now part of the old cemetery.

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claim was contrary to old custom, and "open wrong." They told also the tale of John Bristowe's offences in enclosing and sending his cattle upon the pastures.

"And sithen the deth of the seid John Bristowe . . . the same William Bristowe, willyng be his power to contynue the forseid wrong done be his seid ffadir, wrongfully put into the same closez, and the forseid other common grounde residue, dyuers bestes of his ffermors of Whitley, seying presumptuously that he and his tennantez of Whitley wolden haue comyn for their bestes at Whitley withoute nombre" in all places upon the said common ground. Whereas this land, on the contrary, had formerly been occupied by the commonalty of Coventry "yearly" at their pleasure to make their "shutynges, rennynges, daunsynges, bowelyng aleyes, and other their disportez as in their owne ground. And these matiers," the record concludes, "be us also declared ben iuste and true, so help us God at the day of Dome."

No records remain to tell us what was the ultimate decision at which the arbitrators, Catesby and Cumberland, arrived. In the July of the next year another set of arbitrators were at work, either party of litigants being bound in an obligation of 100 marks to abide by their decision. According to this verdict Bristowe was allowed to retain possession of the enclosed parts, but the mayor and community were to have "common for beasts from Lammas to Candlemas in the said land if it were fallow, and if it be sown as soon as the corn is carried away," while Bristowe and his heirs were allowed to common with the inhabitants of Coventry on the lands between his estate and the city.¹

It is very probable that the good folk of the city

¹ Corp. MS. C. 204. The varieties in the nomenclature of the various fields makes it difficult to pronounce decidedly whether Bristowe gained all he desired according to this arbitration.

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were ill-pleased with this decision, which was of the nature of a compromise; for although they were allowed, as of old, the use of the fields during the autumn and winter months, yet they must, according to the terms of the arbitration, admit Bristowe's cattle to a share in their pastures. And the large flocks, which he kept together with those of the prior, and another grazier, devoured, they said to one another, the pasture which of right belonged to their geldings and cattle. It appears that attempts had been made to break up the Prior's Waste and the close by the New Gate, for the leet fixed the penalty of those who should offend in this manner at forty shillings.¹ Men of long memories must have pointed out to the anxious crowds at Lammas these encroachments on the land of the community. "The people come at the opening and overseeing of the common," runs an order of leet for the year 1474, "in excess number and unruly to full ill example." And it was ordained that on this day none should accompany the chamberlains, when they rode out into the fields about the city to throw open the common lands, but those to whom permission had been previously given.²

But those whose minds dwelt on these abuses of encroachment and surcharging with others permitted by the corporation found a spokesman and chief of their party in the dyer, Laurence Saunders. To judge from the position of Laurence and his friends, the heads of this party were men of good standing in the town and well-to-do. They could count among their number brethren of the guild, and men "of substance" sufficient to admit of their filling the lower municipal offices, the

¹ *Leet Book*, 375.

² Bristowe's case was again under discussion in 1475, see Corp. MS. D. 2. This time a verdict, given not by a Coventry jury, but by a jury of twenty-four knights from the vicinage of the city, was favourable to Bristowe, and acquitted him of the charge of assault, etc., brought against him by the corporation.

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warden's post or the chamberlain's. These men had grievances other than the surcharging or enclosing of the common pasture—questions to which Laurence's formal petitions are wholly devoted: their trade was shorn of its profits. In complaints coming from Laurence's followers, we are told that the rulers of the city "picked away the thrift" of the "commonalty"; and reference is made to certain unpopular acts of leet touching the citizens, not only as sharers of the common pasture, but also as makers, buyers, and sellers—in short, as craftsmen.

William Saunders, the father of Laurence, had been mayor in the year the Prior's Waste was enclosed. He must have been a wealthy citizen to rise to the mayor's degree. Since 1434 the family had lived in Spon Street,¹ a convenient neighbourhood for those of the dyer's occupation, as the river flowed near. If he had been of a submissive temper, in all likelihood Laurence would have risen to high places, as his father had done. Owing perhaps to William Saunders's influence, early in life the son once gave his adherence to the municipality, in so far as, when the question of enclosing the Waste was brought forward, his name appears among the two hundred and sixteen who consented to the measures which, on looking back eleven years later, he unreservedly condemned. It was in 1480 that he was chosen to fill the post of chamberlain or treasurer, and probably from that time, as a member of both the guilds, or as a late municipal officer, he was on the roll of those liable to be summoned by the mayor to attend the council.² The

¹ *Leet Book*, 156.

² Laurence was a member of the "council of Forty-eight," *Leet Book*, 521, and a member of both guilds (Sharp, *Antiq.*, 235; *Leet Book*, 578). In 1495 Saunders was discharged from all attendance at the mayor's council, the common council, and all other councils to be taken within the city (*Ib.*, 564). The common council is first mentioned in 1477. Probably the "Forty-eight" and the common council were identical. The "mayor's council" consisted apparently of such of the "Forty-

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chamberlainship was an irksome post. The officers were overseers of the common pasture, and took fines from the owners of strayed cattle. They received the murage dues, which were devoted to repairing the walls and city buildings, giving in an account of the outlay at the end of the year. The murage money was continually running short about this time, as the prior could not be induced to pay his share, and the chamberlains were frequently called upon to make up the deficit.¹

The corporation quickly found they had reason to repent of their choice. Laurence was a "masterful" man; "where he is subject and servant he would subdue us all if he might get assistance," the mayor complains in a letter written this year to the Prince of Wales. The *Leet Book* gives a specimen of the new officer's insubordination.² It appears that labourers had been set to quarry for stone required for repairing the town wall. At the end of the week the two chamberlains, Saunders and his fellow, William Hede, refused, contrary to custom, to give them their wages, Laurence saying "presumptuously" to the mayor that "those that set them awork shuld pay for him." The two officers were there and then committed to prison, where they lay for a week. In the end the petitions of their friends obtained a release. Both were, however, bound in £40 to abide by the decision of the mayor and council as to their punishment. The mayor and council fixed upon a fine of £10, and of this they afterwards gave back £6 to the two chamberlains, a piece of liberality which shows that the town rulers knew their cause was weak, or thought it impolitic to push Saunders to extremities while such a strong feeling in his favour existed throughout the city.

eight" as he cared to summon. There is no evidence that these councillors were elected by wards.

¹ The prior, in 1498, is said to have refused to pay it for twenty years (*Leet Book*, 592).

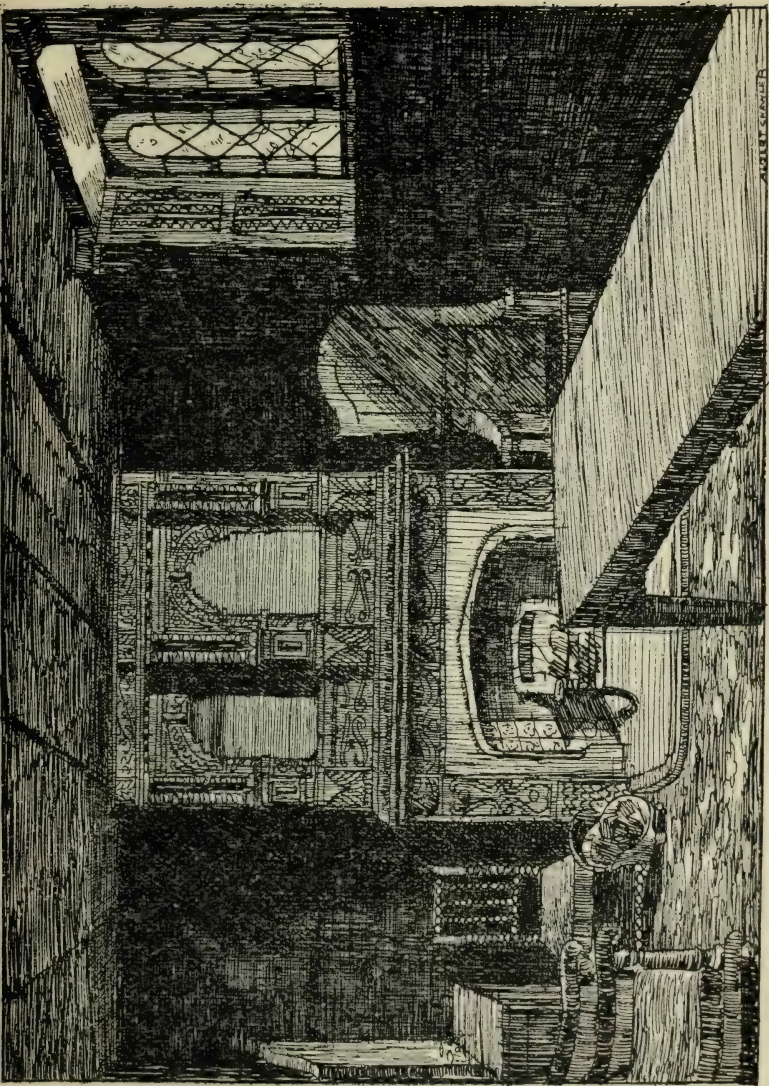
² *Ib.*, 430 *sqq.*

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Matters did not improve as time went on. The *Leet Book* relates how Laurence, in spite of the forbearance shown towards him, was "wilfully disposed" against both the mayor and "common people," distraining their cattle and taking "excess" fines for the pound. When summoned before the mayor to "see direction," according to custom, he "many times grudged so to do, and in manner at all times disdained to be led by the said mayor." Finally, on September 20, having obtained licence to leave the city on the plea of business at Southampton, he turned his horse's head in the direction of Ludlow and rode thither, bearing in his hands a petition addressed to the Prince of Wales, who, as Duke of Cornwall, was the lord and special protector of the city. The prince, a child of ten years old, kept his court at Ludlow Castle, at that time under the guardianship of his uncle, the Earl Rivers.

It is very evident that this account of the first falling-out between the chamberlains and the corporation does not go to the root of the matter. Laurence's conduct is more explicable when we turn to the version he gives of the affair in the "Petition of the chamberlains and citizens of Coventry,"¹ for in this document, which he tendered to the prince's council, his finger can be distinctly traced. According to this petition, there were two grievances under which the community then laboured. In the first place the prior, the recorder, Bristowe, and others, withheld from them half of the common lands; in the second, a favoured few "maintained" by the recorder and the mayor, "surcharged" the pasture with what number of sheep they chose, while the common folk of the city were not allowed to go beyond their "stint," the number laid down by the authorities. In a city where there was much clothmaking, and wool greatly in request, there was naturally a good deal of scope for the grazier, and no doubt the men of this calling had

¹ *Leet Book*, 436 sqq.



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come to an understanding with the municipality. The chamberlains' duty, however, was perfectly clear. They were enjoined by an order of leet, passed only nine years before, to drive the flocks of those who surcharged the commons to the pound, and take distress from the owners until they should pay the customary fine.¹ This order they accordingly fulfilled, but whether they really asked for what the municipal version calls an "excess" fine there is no means of discovering. But the mayor desired that they should be ruled by his likings and accordingly tried the persuasion of a week's imprisonment. Finding that after their release the chamberlains still persisted in this course, he again and again delivered up the sheep and remitted the fine. Whenever this was done the officers sustained the loss of several shillings, for the charge for every score was fourpence, and there is mention of nine and ten score, and even of 300 sheep driven into the pound. It would seem that in all these matters the mayor was but the tool of the recorder, Harry Boteler, or Butler, who had succeeded to the recordership in 1456, in the room of Thomas Littleton, of famous memory. It was Boteler who, according to the petition, kept Saunders and Hede in prison over the day of the Easter leet, and "wolde in no wyse suffre" them "to speke a worde for the said comown." He, too, urged on them the signing of the recognisance in £40 "to obbeie the meirs commandements" about the pinfold charges, although the chamberlains "grudged" to do so, "in so moche as they were solemply sworn to the contrarie." And from this bond he would not release them, he cried a month later, "for the best pece of scarlet in England." As for the prior's sheep, though four hundred of them were

¹ *Leet Book*, 348. "Cattle surcharging the common to be driven to the pound and distress taken." And yet this very year the corporation declared to the prior that the citizens always had driven their cattle "without number" on the commons.

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grazing on the common, "contrarie to old custom," the recorder would not suffer them to be pinned, because the prior, forsooth, was "lord of the soil." And when the chamberlains asked that the closes which the prior kept in severalty might be thrown open at Lammas, it was Boteler who refused, alleging the "composition" made between the prior and the community "in the time of William Saunders beying meir."¹

"Wher it ought to be comen as all the body of the city knowen; in that the forseid Laurens, on of the said Chamberleins, grugged (grudged) inso-moche as the seid mair, decessed, was his fadir and myght not answer for hymself, but said 'that he trusted in God to see hit comen ayen.'"

Then the recorder burst forth :

"That he wold make the seid Chamberlein to curse the tyme that ever he sigh hym and wolde make him to wepe water with his yen,² and for to be revenged vppon hym he saide he wolde ryde to complayne vppon him unto our soveraign lorde the Kyng."

The petition ends with a list of the fields enclosed by the prior, the Trinity guild, and others of the city.

It is clear from the recorder's speech that there was expectation of battle toward, and Boteler had no mind to give quarter. Meanwhile Laurence, by his appeal to the prince's council, had stolen a march upon his enemies. A letter, dated September 30, 1480, required that some discreet persons of the city council should ride to Ludlow, bearing a copy of the chamberlain's oath, in order that the prince's council might compose "a variance between certain people of the city about a common pasture." This letter revealed to the corporation the chamberlain's secret mission. "We, your humble and true servants here," the mayor and his

¹ *Lect Book*. 439. The meadows in question were the Prior's Waste and the close by the New Gate. See above, p. 176.

² *i.e.* "eyes."

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brethren wrote in reply, "know no variance betwixt any person here for any common pasture but that we among ourselves, by the grace of God, shall amicably and righteously settle." They begged that Saunders' words might not be "printed in the prince's remembrance," and hoped to have license to punish this troublesome citizen, inasmuch as he would raise up "commotions among the people," and by this means discourage "other misruled to presumptuously attempt such things hereafter." As the prince still insisted that the suit should be heard at Ludlow, eighteen "worshipful" men, chosen by the common council, set forth on the journey. Among them were numbered the recorder, lately recovered from sickness; the master of the Trinity Guild; John Boteler, town clerk, presumably a son of the recorder; and William Hede, the chamberlain, Laurence's fair-weather friend, who had betimes humbly submitted to the corporation. The wardens, to whom the paying of extraordinary expenses fell, went with the party to pay for the cost of the journey. There was a goodly following of servants, bringing up the number to forty-four persons in all, for the worshipful folk travelled luxuriously, and to secure their comfort a cook and a harbinger were of the company. The cost of the journey—amounting to £15, 11s. 11d.—was afterwards, by decree of the mayor and council, discharged by Laurence Saunders. There is nothing related of the proceedings of the case, save that the decision was against Laurence. The *Leet Book* says, as openly was proved, he intended no "reformation, . . . but feyned matiers to th' entent to have be venged for the due punysshement yeven to him for his obstinacy."¹ So he came home to receive "correction," and in his company there came a gentleman of the prince's council to see that he fulfilled all the commands laid upon him. There was nothing for it now but to bow before the storm. In the presence of the mayor, the

¹ *Leet Book*, 441.

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council, and divers "commons" assembled in S. Mary's Hall, Laurence, it is said, knelt down and besought the mayor's forgiveness, acknowledging his wrong-doing. He was then committed to ward. After a little time his friends' intercession prevailed, and he was allowed to leave the prison, being bound in £500 to appear at the next quarter sessions. The bond, too—for the corporation were little inclined to allow further complaints to royalty—was to be renewed "till content wer' had" of his "sadde demeanyng."

But though Saunders had been effectually silenced, the strife he had kindled raged on. Bristowe and the prior, whose transgressions in the matter of surcharging were revealed in Laurence's complaint, were both ready to pour forth counter-claims and accusations against the corporation in the hearing of the prince's council, at the time when Saunders' case was still under discussion. Prior Deram being advised to present his grievances in writing to the mayor and his brethren, tendered, on November 16, 1480, an exhaustive list of them,¹ which list the corporation hardly received in a befittingly serious spirit.

Although in the prior's complaint the matter of surcharging is kept somewhat in the background, there can be little doubt that here the real grievance lay. The mayor and his friends had been perhaps very lenient to the convent in this particular until Laurence's petition to the prince had aroused their scruples, and they may have been forced to revive old regulations concerning the "stint." When the prior argued that as "lord of the soil" he was not "admeasurable," but able to drive on to the pasture what number of cattle he chose, the mayor and his brethren feigned blank ignorance. They did not know, they declared, that the prior was "lord of the soil,"² but were of opinion that his action would be

¹ *Leet Book*, 443 *sqq.*

² Mayor's reply, *Leet Book*, 457.

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"disseizin of the common."¹ They even tried to shield Laurence Saunders when the prior alleged that his "slanders" were a source of great annoyance to the convent. He had been examined, they affirmed, and declared he never "noised" such lands as were held by the monks to be common, but those he had believed were so according to "the black book of the city"; but if Laurence had offended, they continued, he would be pleased to abide by what the mayor and prior chose to command him.

There was another memory that rankled with the monks—the tumult on S. Nicholas' day, 1469, and the subsequent action of William Saunders to prevent the prior from "troubling" the city with a lawsuit. His gardens, Deram indignantly reminded them, and his woods at Whitmoor, had been broken into at that date; and he was not allowed to sue the misdoers at law. Again he was met by a front of stolid ignorance. The mayor and community remembered no such breaking, or any hindrance to the prior's suit, which he was at liberty to pursue. Grievances Deram had to pour forth in plenty. The town wall was built on his land, he complained, though his payment of £10 for murage, of pure good will, for repairing the town wall outside his ground entitled him to some consideration in this matter. The folk of the city gave him hourly torment. They broke down his underwood, birches, holly, and hawthorn in Whitmoor Park, and carried them away; they trod under foot his grass and his corn, damaged his hedges "at their shooting called roving, to his hurt a hundred shillings"; they washed in Swanswell pool,

¹ In the lord's outwoods, moors, and heaths, which were never under the plough, "he should not be stinted, for the soil is his" (Rogers, *Six Cent.* 90). It is extremely doubtful whether the common lands of Coventry should be included in this category; many of them had been "under the plough."

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and fished in his ponds "by night and by day," and made his orchard and several grounds a sporting place with shooting and other games, and when "they been challenged by his sergeants they gyven hem short langage, seying that they will have hit their sportyng place." The churchwardens lopped off the boughs of the trees in S. Michael's churchyard, and all manner of filth was deposited in the convent ground, "so that the prior may not have his carriage through his orchard"; while by reason of the refuse swept into the river his mill was "letted to go," and himself and his brethren sorely hurt and discomfited by the stench. At divers times the prior had put up bills against the offenders "in certen sessions, but," he concluded resentfully, "thei ben so supported within this citie and the enquestes so favourable to hem that no reformation nor punysshement hath ben don."

The mayor and community¹ assured the prior in return that they were most anxious to maintain a friendly understanding with the convent. The authorities of the city, they said, "maken dayly als gret diligens as they can to knowe the stoppers of the seid common ryver, and when eny be perceyved, they ben punysshed after their deserve." As to the breaking of the underwood, every year masters of the crafts, by the command of the mayor, enjoined the members to refrain from this "in eschewyng the doughtfull censures of the Church," and also temporal punishment. But the prior was reminded how "the people of every gret cite as London . . . yerely in somer doon harme to divers lords and gentyles hauyng wods and groves nygh to such citees . . . and yit the lords and gentils suffren sych dedes ofte tymes of their goode will." And if the town wall ran on the prior's land—as it did on other freehold within the city—the convent owed their security to these fortifications, and ought of right to contribute to their erection and

¹ *Leet Book*, 454.

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repair, "because their lyffeloode within this citie, and their proper Churche may rest in surte be measne of the seid murage." The lopping of trees in the churchyard they laid to the charge of the vicar; while as for the fish in Swanswell pool, they profited by the washing there, and thereby grew "the fatter!" Let the prior, the mayor continued, send in the names of the shooters, trespassers, and the like, and bring an action against them; and take proceedings against the casters of refuse—for they were his own tenants—in his own court leet.

The prior fumed at the audacity of this reply, and still more at the delay in returning it, for more than six weeks had elapsed since his bill of complaint had been issued. His rejoinder¹ was drawn up in two days, a briefer space. The mayor had besought him (not without hypocrisy, to Deram's mind) "that he would be as good to the common weal as his predecessors had been," so that "love . . . betwixt" him and the city might "continue and dayly better increce"; but he distrusted these professions of peace. "And whereas," he said, "the meire and his brethren prayen hertly to the prior and his convent lovyngly to accept their answeres made to their compleynts, thei think it is (in them) no lovynge desire." "His greves," he reminded them, had been presented in writing "the xvi day of November last past . . . to the which the ii^{de} day of Januar next followyng" they had returned answer: "by the which I and my bredern," the good man went on, lapsing into the first person in the heat and hurry of his sentences, "thinke is no thyng accordyng for reformacion, but delayes; wherefore I and they desyre and prey you to have us excused of further comunicacion. . . . For we trust to God in [that] our compleynts ben no feyned matiers, but such as shall be proved be credible proves in writyng." "And for your answeres," he added with a touch of irony, "ye

¹ *Leet Book*, 470.

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have taken longe leysar to conceyve, suasyous-like (persuasive) as it appereth," they would have none of it, "but we trust to haue oder remedye wher trowthe shalbe knowen."

How strangely this dispute sounds in our ears, with its childish display of offended dignity on one side, and half-soothing, half-taunting tone on the other ! But the petulant old prior did not long add to the difficulties of the corporation. When John Boteler, the untiring steward, went to London in the following Lent to find out what course the convent meant to pursue with regard to the suit at law between them and the city, he learnt that the enemy was dead.¹ But though the article about surcharging and the minor questions sank into insignificance the dispute about the murage continued for many years, the convent still refusing to pay the tax. At last, in 1498, the matter was set at rest by the bishop's arbitration, the prior paying the annual tax, upon condition that he should in future be made privy to the chamberlains' accounts, in so far as they related to murage.²

But though the prior was dead, and Laurence for the moment quiet, the troubles and litigations in which the corporation was involved were by no means past. On Lammas day, 1481, Bristowe, contrary to the tenor of previous arbitration, refused to allow the chamberlains to enter and throw open his field at Whitley, threatening, if they did so, to sue them for trespass. Immediately the recorder, town-clerk, and others rode to Worcester to lay the matter before the prince's council.³ There it was decided that until the prince could appear to adjust the rival claims neither party should enjoy the use of this meadow. Two experts came⁴ by order of the prince's council to examine documents, but Bristowe's were not

¹ *Leet Book*, 474. ² Corp. MS. C 209. ³ *Leet Book*, 490.

⁴ Fineux, one of the prince's council, was deputed to examine the title deeds on behalf of the town, and Catesby on behalf of Bristowe.

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ready, and after a repetition of the old practice of consulting the oldest inhabitants, the decision was postponed. But the common people could not afford to wait the law's delays. After the departure of the lords of the prince's council, says the *Leet Book*, "divers evell disposed persons in gret nombre of their frowardnesse went to the seid grounde and ther cast down heggs and dikes." Harry Boteler, the recorder, always active when trouble came, went out and bade them "leave off their frowardness." All went back to their work save one, John Tyler, who gave the recorder "froward and unfitting language," and was committed to prison. A riot took place on the Trinity guild feast day, the Decollation of S. John the Baptist, the rioters rang the common bell, and made an attempt to rescue Tyler. Until, the writer of the *Leet Book* says with evident relief, "loued (praised) be God, the meir and dyvers of his brethern came among them and sessed them," Tyler being delivered to the citizens under surety for that time."¹

The news of the riot was not long in reaching the ears of the King. He wrote in great wrath, straitly charging the mayor and his brethren, as they would avoid "his high displeur" and "entende to enjoye the fraunches and liberties of the seid cite," to show no favour to the rioters, and to inform "our derrest son," the prince, of the whole proceeding. The mayor and his brethren were in an extremity of terror, remembering the King's high actions and the confiscation of ten years back after Barnet Field. They sent a letter to the prince at Woodstock by the hand of their steward, beseeching him to be a "gracious mean" for them with his royal father, promising speedily to punish the offenders already "endited for riot and trespass." Meanwhile, they laid the cause of the riot at the door of the real offender. "The common peopull her in gret noumbre," they alleged, "thynken that all the defalt is caused be William

¹ *Leet Book*, 492.

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Bristowe," who had not kept his promise made to the lords of the prince's council with regard to the meadow, nor removed "the bestes of estraunge persones occupeyng in his name the seid common."¹ Of Bristowe and his lengthy suit they were well weary. "The people understonon," the mayor writes hopelessly, "that be his longe defferyngs, cautels, vexacions and troubles, he wold never have conclucion, but find measne of trouble and vexacion to hurt and disheryte the pore commons her of their rightfull common," which he will do, except the prince aid.

Edward IV. was not altogether satisfied with this humble submission. He complained of conventicles that were not suppressed, and evil-doers unpunished, "diuers of yowe in maner supposyng them to be supported and fauored be persones hauyng rule in our seid cite."² Two of the rioters were ordered to be sent to the King at Woodstock, to be delivered up to Lord Rivers for imprisonment at Ludlow.³ One of the two was immediately arrested; another "withdrew himself," but afterwards, as it seems, of his own free will, went off to Ludlow to share the imprisonment of his companion. They were released on the following Easter, and returned to the city.

But this rising had at least the effect of precipitating matters with regard to Bristowe. He appears to have desired the whole affair to be settled according to common law; but as the community had no evidence to support their claims, save the testimony of the aged men of the place, they were most anxious to have the affair arranged "according to composition."³ For five

¹ Bristowe seems to have allowed his tenants of Whitley to share in his privilege of intercommoning with the people of Coventry. See above, p. 174.

² *Lect Book*, 497.

² *Ib.*, 496.

³ Disputes concerning the common lands were usually settled by arbitration, and not before the judges of the King's

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weeks the master of the Trinity guild and John Boteler, the steward,¹ lingered in London about the business, and even undertook a journey to Southampton, where the King, being informed of Bristowe's "wilfulness," seems to have inclined favourably towards the cause of the citizens. In the August of the following year their stubborn antagonist gave way and consented to abide by the arbitration of the Prince of Wales. Boteler accordingly hurried off to Ludlow, and a final decision was arrived at in favour, we suppose, of the community; but although such ample details concerning this thirteen-year old dispute are laid before us, nothing is said of the final result.

But although this matter was decided, nothing was done with regard to the other enclosures, and Laurence Saunders became unquiet. He drew up a second list of the meadows that were withheld from the community, and laid it before the mayor and council.² It is noteworthy that "Mr" Onley, a member of one of the oldest merchant families within the city, figures in the list as the holder of a "field called Ashmore." The council condescended to explain how and when the enclosures had been made. The *Leet Book* says "they made him privy to the evidence of the city in that behalf." But when Laurence desired a copy of these records to show to "certain people of the city"—old men of his party, no doubt, whose memories reached to bygone times—it was indignantly refused him. The mayor and council would never stoop so low as to furnish all chance comers with the means of cavilling at their proceedings! Then Laurence Saunders burst forth into "untoward" speech, asking to be released

bench, possibly because the "communitas" had no power to sue in law courts as a legal person (Green, *Town Life*, ii. 239).

¹ Boteler filled the post of steward as well as that of town clerk.

² *Leet Book*, 510-11.

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from his bond (the £500?), and showing he would not "otherwise be ruled than after his own will." The matter was shown to the lords of the prince's council, then tarrying in Coventry. By their advice Laurence was committed to the "porter's ward" the Saturday before All-Hallows'; and when, after a week had passed, and he was released "at the great instance" of his friends, it was not without an admonition. The lords told him this was the second time "he had ben in warde for his disobeysaunce and for commociouns made among the pepull; they bad hym be war, for yf he cam the III^{de} tyme in warde for such matiers, hit shulde cost hym his hedde." The warning was not without its effect. Laurence, for the second time, made a full submission, and also signed a "statute merchant," this time in £200, undertaking that he would be "of good bearing to the mayor and his successors . . . for ever"; and four craftsmen, who dwelt near him in Spon Street,¹ were responsible for his conduct in half this sum. Of the fine of £10, which they exacted from him, half was in course of time to be given back, if his submissive temper showed signs of lasting. It might well be thought he would not again question the high ways of the corporation, for by so doing he might involve his friends in ruin.²

For twelve years there is no record that Saunders ever troubled the peace of men in high places. During this interval death removed his great enemy, the old recorder; and royal favour—for Henry VII. was ever prudent in such matters—gained the vacant post for Richard Empson. In 1484, three years before his death, Boteler was overtaken by a great disgrace. He

¹ *Leet Book*, 483.

² It is noticeable that immediately after this the leet gave orders that some of the fields granted to the prior, *i.e.* the field by the New Gate, should be had again "in a perpetual ferm" of the convent.

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magnified his own office at the mayor's expense;¹ and, as a punishment, the Forty-eight—with Laurence for the first time on record sitting among the number—decreed that on all public occasions he should not immediately follow the mayor, but should give precedence to the master of the Trinity guild.² It may be that this blow broke the old man's proud spirit. He became "of so gret febulness" that the men of the city, fearing that "any casuale of disease by God's visitation [might] come unto him," began to take into consideration the claims of possible recorders. Boteler, however, kept the post until his death, when the King, hearing how "it had pleased our blessed Creatur to calle late from this vncertain and transorite lif unto his great and inestimable mercy"³ the old recorder, wrote to inquire concerning the candidates for the vacant post.

There are signs that about this time Laurence was looked upon with more favour by those in power.⁴ In 1494, however, a change of policy, owing perhaps to the influence of the mayor, a grocer, named Robert Green, caused him to take up his old position. In those days the matter of enclosures was but one among many sources of trouble. In the first place, in that same year, the corporation, perhaps suddenly roused to the doings of the various crafts, thought that they had enjoyed in the past few years more liberty than

¹ He said "he had as much power as the mayor, and could arrest him at sessions sitting on the bench" (*Leet Book*, 520).

² Unless he would submit to this condition and to take an oath at Candlemas—as the mayor did—he was to be dismissed. Boteler chose to submit.

³ *Leet Book*, 537.

⁴ The records are very meagre about this time. The fact that Laurence was a member of the Forty-eight is an indication that the corporation were well disposed towards him. The fact that the very same mayor who occasioned Boteler's disgrace enforced certain acts of leet against the bakers is also a proof that there was a change of policy in his time at least (*ib.*, 518-9).

they were disposed to allow. They turned their attention to the pewterers' and tanners' fellowships.¹ Complaint being made concerning "discevable" pewterers' ware, the leet ordained,—that all such as "maken and medle metailles within this cite, as vessels of brasse, peauter and laten," should sell true goods, "medled be due proporcion," and to such merchants as had served an apprenticeship to the craft. Furthermore, the master of the fellowship received orders to seize any faulty vessels and bring them before the mayor and council; the maker, in the event of the charge being proved, was condemned to forfeit the sum of twenty shillings. Then the tanners felt the effects of the energy of the leet. Certain of the craft were wont to buy raw hides "in grete," with the intention, no doubt of selling them at a profit. This practice the court forbade, under pain of a forty-shilling fine, to be taken from buyer and seller alike. The irritation these ordinances called forth among certain members of these fellowships can be illustrated from the records of the leet held the following year. It was then enacted that John Duddesbury, a tanner,² and John Smith, a pewterer, for their repeated ill-behaviour to "men of worship," were to be put "under surety from session to session,"³ until their submissive behaviour should content the justices of the peace.

A highly unpopular measure was the work of the mayor himself. This ordinance looks simple enough, but there is possibly a deeper meaning underlying it. Before his indentures were made, every apprentice was ordered to pay twelve pence towards the common funds,

¹ *Leet Book*, 554, 557.

² Corp. MS. A. 6. Corpus Christi guild accounts.

³ *Leet Book*, 569. This order was re-enacted in 1497; *Ib.*, 585. No tanner or butcher was "to make conspiracy . . . contrary to this ordinance." Duddesbury had been a member of the Twenty-four, and was mayor in 1505.

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have his name entered in a book prepared for the purpose by the town clerk, and "swear to the franchises" of the city.¹ The apprentices' friends might feel aggrieved at this new exaction; it is less easy to understand why the masters were inclined to resist the measure. That they were so inclined is shown by an order made some six months afterwards to the effect that those who still received apprentices contrary to the ordinance, and continued stubborn, were to be committed to ward and *find surety that they would in future obey all ordinances of leet*.² The corporation had some motive in binding the apprentices by a solemn oath and enrolling them in this methodical fashion; they evidently wished to keep a tight hold on them for some particular purpose. For a hundred years Coventry had been celebrated for clothmaking, and the sellers of cloth had been the richest men in the city, and members of their fellowship more frequently in office than those of any other occupation.³ It was important that the merchants and drapers—and of these the corporation was chiefly composed—should be able to keep the *makers* of cloth, weavers and fullers, well under control; and in attempting this, quarrels may well have arisen. The merchants, thinking they would again arise, determined to weaken the master-makers of cloth by keeping this tight hold over the apprentices, and making them responsible to the corporation.

Certain practices, in all probability lately revived under this mayor or his successor, were particularly

¹ *Leet Book*, 553-4.

² *Ib.*, 559. The continuation of this order shows how restive the people were becoming under the recent regulations, a like surety was to be taken from any one who would not obey orders of leet and be reformed by the mayor and council.

³ Lists of all the living craftsmen who had held office were compiled in 1449: 16 drapers, 13 mercers, 7 dyers, 2 wire-drawers, 2 whittawers, and 2 weavers are mentioned (*ib.*, 246-52).

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detested by the citizens concerned in clothmaking. Coventry was a great centre for the weaver's industry. For a long time past, in accordance with orders of leet, cloth had been sold on market days in the "Drapery," in S. Michael's churchyard, a house of which the Trinity guild had been possessed for the last 130 years.¹ There was a second selling place, the porch of S. Michael's church, which lay a few yards from the Drapery door. This had been in all probability the traditional sale ground for cloth before the Drapery was fixed on and passed into the possession of the guild. In the church porch the payment of stallage might be avoided, and it may be the makers did not fear for their workmanship the strict supervision of the craft of drapers. In 1455 the sale of cloth in the porch was forbidden by the leet;² yet no doubt, in spite of pains and penalties, the weavers or makers still drove their bargains, whenever it was possible, outside the walls of the Drapery. But the municipality resolved that the orders of leet should no longer be set at nought; cloth must henceforward be sold in the Drapery,³ and not elsewhere.

There was also a fixed place for the weighing and sale of wool, called the Wool-hall, adjoining the Drapery, and likewise the property of the guild.⁴ The trade in wool was, no doubt, chiefly in the hands of the wealthy merchants, many of whom were "of the Staple of Calais." The wardens also overlooked the weighing, and took from the owners certain dues "for the profit of the town."⁵ These dues must have increased the price of wool, so that the weavers or clothmakers—or whatever body of men purchased the wool for manufacture

¹ Drapery granted to the Trinity gild 1365-9 (Sharp, 131).

² *Leet Book*, 281.

³ These words are almost identical with a gloss, written in the margin of one ordinance passed in 1495. For the profits arising from the Nottingham Drapery, see *Nottingham Rec.*, iii. 62.

⁴ Corp. MS. B. 75.

⁵ *Leet Book*, 193. This order was passed in 1440.

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in the first instance¹—suffered by reason of such a regulation, and poor householders who bought the wool to weave for their own use were in like case. The enforcement of this order² and the consequent collection of dues were bitterly resented, and the citizens, reminded of the traditional “toll freedom” of their market, cried that the city that had been free was now in bondage.

“ Dame goode Eve³ made hit fre,
& now the custom for wol & the draperie.”

But before Green's year of mayoralty was past, the corporation found that they would still have to reckon with Laurence Saunders. It was on Lammas day, 1494, in the presence—so the mayor and council were “credibly informed”—of forty persons, that he spoke these words: “Sirs, her me! we shall never have our rights till we have striken of the heads of *iii* or *iiii* of thes Churles heds that rulen us, and if thereafter hit be asked who did that dede, hit shalbe seid, me and they, and they and me.” “He shuld constreyn,” Laurence went on, “William Boteler to drive his Cart laden with Ots into the Croschepyng, and ther to unlade the seid cart.” Now, William Boteler was probably either a forestaller and regrater, who intercepted, in defiance of all manner of ordinances to the contrary, the grain intended to be sold openly in the market, or he had encroached upon the common land. Laurence, it appears, fulfilled his

¹ In Coventry the wool buyers appear to have been the clothmakers. The dyers in 1415, who were “great makers of cloth,” took “the flower of the woad” for their own use (*Rot. Parl.*, iv. 75). In 1435 we hear of the clothmakers employing combers to card wool (*Leet Book*, 182), and in 1512 we find that a searcher examined the wool to see that it was free from filth for the clothier (*ib.*, 636).

² There are no *new* ordinances relating to the weighing of wool at this time. Most likely the ordinance of 1440 (see above) was often evaded, and it was resolved that a stricter supervision should be exercised.

³ *i.e.* Godiva.

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threat, and cried out to the crowd assembled in the Cross Cheaping or market place: "Come, Sirs, and take the corn who so wyll, as your owne."¹ The whole proceeding utterly scandalised the mayor and his worshipful brethren. On the "Wednesday after the Exaltation of the Holy Cross" they committed Laurence to prison, and fixed his fine at £40. For months he lay there, while two friends, whose names were Alexander Horsley and Robert Barlow,² were surety for the payment of this great sum. But this amount meant ruin, and drove Laurence's party to fury. The mayor and council had treated a fellow-citizen no better than one of those hated Scots. And this was not enough. They also bound over this sower of strife "to good bearing," and the next year, whether for the sake of old offences or for the commission of new ones, wiped out his name from among the number of the rulers of the city. Laurence Saunders was "discharged," the order ran, "from the mayor's council, the common council, and all other councils . . . taken and kept within this city for the welfare of the same," and forbidden under the penalty of £40 ever to ride out with the chamberlains on Lammas day.³

It was an old custom in Coventry to nail up all announcements, which for obvious reasons no crier would consent to proclaim, on the church door, where all might read them. It was in this manner that friar John Bredon, on the occasion of a dispute between his order and the monks, some forty years back, appealed to the citizens to throw off the dominion of the prior, as "the thraldom of Pharaoh." So within eight days

¹ *Leet Book*, 556-7. Laurence afterwards committed William Boteler to ward for breach of regulations of leet doubtless, but "without authority."

² For Robert Barlow, see *Corpus Christi* guild accounts, Corp. MS. A. 6, f. 5.

³ *Leet Book*, 564.

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after Lammas, 1495, some unknown rhymester of the "commonalty" nailed up some verses of his making on the north door of S. Michael's church; forgetting in them neither the oppressive acts which had been lately passed nor the punishment visited on Laurence for the tumult of the preceding year.¹

"Be it knowen & understand,
This Cite shuld be free & nowe is bonde,
Dame goode Eve made hit free,
& now the custome for woll & the draperie.
Also hit is made that no prentes shalbe
But xiii penyes pay shuld he;
That act did Robert Grene,
Therfor he had many a Curse, I wene.
And nowe a nother rule ȝe do make
That none shall ride at Lammas but they that ȝe take
When our ale is Tunned
Ȝe shall have drynk to your cake."

The final lines recall the heavy fine to be paid by Saunders:—

"Ye have put on man like a Scot to raunsome,
That wol be remembered when ye have all forgotten 'Caviat.'"²

It may be that, in the face of this wrathful discontent—it was just at this time that the ill-behaviour of John Smith and John Duddesbury to "men of worship" caused the offenders to be watched so closely—the corporation felt some anxiety. At least they thought it prudent to relieve Laurence of the payment of half of the fine they had laid upon him. Of the remaining sum half was paid by the sureties, but £10 was yet due, and in 1496 Saunders appealed to the King. The fruit of his solicitings was a privy seal, addressed to the mayor and sheriffs asking them in charity to take £10 and remit the rest of the fine, as Laurence was now old and

¹ *Leet Book*, 567. One of the pieces of "civic poetry" quoted by Sharp, 235.

² Sharp, *Antiq.*, 235.

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fallen into poverty.¹ There was one sentence in the letter very little to the recipients' liking. The King ordered the mayor "to do right" in a variance concerning a common pasture which Laurence had informed his grace to be in the city; "where," as the "men of worship" declared with righteous anger, "no such variance was." It would be folly indeed to smooth the lot of Laurence Saunders or release his friends from their bond. So the great culprit having paid £10 and his sureties a like sum, matters must be set right at Court, and the appeals of Laurence and his party made of no effect. So a "writing of the great and many offences of the said Laurence" was sent to Master Richard Empson, who was then in London, to be laid before the King. The mayor and his fellows awaited meanwhile the issue of the recorder's mediation.

Laurence Saunders, too, had his hopes of Court. "As for Mr Recorder," he said confidently a little later, "I have reckoned with him before the King, and he shall be easy enough." Meanwhile Lammas time was approaching, and he looked for some great movement against the corporation, which that season should bring forth. So he went into the house of the mayor, John Dove, and said: "Master mair, I advise yewe to loke wisely on your self, for on Lammasse day ye shall her other tythyngs, & ffor many of these catifes that loke so hy nowe shall be brought lower; and ye knowe wele amongist yowe ye have of myn x li: of money, which I dought not I shall have ayen on Lamasse day, or elles iii or iiij of the best of yowe shall smart. Therfor I advise yowe, ber upright the swerd at your perill, for ye shall knowe mor shortly."

That allusion to the mayor's sword carried a sting. A century ago, Richard II. had ordered it to be borne

¹ *Lect Book*, 574; Corp. MS. A. 79, f. 14. The poverty from which Laurence suffered now had probably not afflicted him earlier in his career.

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behind John Deister, the mayor, rather than before him as the custom was, "*because he did not do justice.*" It may be John Dove was secretly afraid. Had he done justice continually? What if the King should visit Laurence with his favour now? Though this man made so light of the mayor's dignity, he was not punished; but all waited for the news from London.

On July 20 Laurence determined to justify his position by putting in his petition of grievances for the third time. He laid before the mayor a list of the enclosed common lands, drawn up from inquiries made among old men of the city the year of his chamberlainship. He asked that the bill might be read aloud in open court, for the sessions of the peace were then proceeding. John Dove was not prepared to do this. It was not a matter to be determined in that court, and besides, he understood that it required no haste. Saunders might come and have his answer on the morrow by nine of the clock. On hearing this the old taunt sprang to Laurence's lips, "*Maister meir,*" he said aloud in the assembly, "*hold upright your swerde*"; and after expressing his hope of "*reckoning with Mr Recorder,*" he left John Dove to recover his dignity.

As far as we can tell, Saunders' hour of triumph never came, for there was no rising at Lammas; but soon after the scandal at the sessions came a letter from the King, giving the mayor and council full permission to deal with the rebel "*after the good and laudable custom of the city.*" This permission must have afforded them untold relief. As Laurence refused to give any pledge as to his future conduct, they committed him to prison. But he never rested, nor did his friends give up the battle. They interceded at Court, this time with Thomas Savage, the Bishop of Rochester,¹ and it seemed that

¹It is noticeable that this bishop sympathized with the unruly people of York. See Miss Sellers, "*The City of York in the Sixteenth Century*" in *Eng. Hist. Rev.*, ix. 275.

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their intercession was likely to bear fruit, for letters arrived to the effect that Laurence should be set free to plead his cause before the King at Woodstock. But the mayor and council would not let him go, for he offered, to their thinking, insufficient surety, letting fall also many seditious words, which are recorded in the *Book of Council*, and saying, “he wold fynd no other what so ever fell theruppon.” Wherefore, the *Leet Book* says, he remained in prison.

Two “seditious bills”—one nailed on the minster door on S. Anne’s Day—show how strained the situation was becoming. If ever, during a century and a half, the rule of the Coventry guilds had been as thoroughly detested as now, the feeling had never been put in words that have come down to us with such unmistakable force. Of these attacks, the second has a much loftier tone. After a passing reference to Laurence, lying in prison—

“ You have hunted the hare,
You hold him in a snare”—

there come, in the first set of verses, a warning to all the great folk that have forgotten to rule justly:—

“ Ye that be of myght,
Se that ye do right,
Thynk on your othe;
For wher that ye do wrong,
Ye shall mend hit among,
Though ye be never so loth.”

The poet and his friends—he says in the second set of verses—show outward respect to their rulers, but their minds are full of bitterness:—

“ This cyte is bond thad shuld be fre,
The right is holden fro the Cominalte;
Our Comiens that at lamas open shuld be cast
They be closed in & hegged full fast,



BABLAKE AND S. JOHN'S CHURCH

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And he that speketh for our right is in the hall,¹
And that is shame for yewe & for us all;
You can not denygh hit but he is your brother;
& to bothe Gilds he hath paid as moch as another."

As for the "commonalty," they have no more to lose,
the verse goes on to say:—

"For eny favour or frenship the comins with yowe fynde,
But pyke away our thryfte & make us all blynde;
And ever ye have nede to the Cominalte,
Such favour as ye shewe us, such shall ye see.
We may speke feir & bid you goode morowe,
But luff with our herts shull ye hav non.
Cherish the Cominalte & se that they have ther right,
For drede of a worse chaunce be day or be nyght,
The best of you all litell worth shuld be,
And ye had not help of the Cominalte."²

Matters remained for some time at a standstill; then at last, early in November, Laurence's "labour and busy suit" brought two privy seals, containing full directions, to Coventry.³ The mayor was required to release the prisoner after taking surety in £100, so that he might appear before the King and council and state his case; while two or three of the mayor's brethren sufficiently instructed in the matters to be laid to his charge were to bear him company. At a meeting of the council on November 14, certain citizens, among whom was John Boteler the steward, were appointed to ride to London. There, joined by the recorder and others of the city, who no doubt had already entered on various negotiations connected with this suit, they were to lay an account of Laurence's "demeasner" before the King. Another privy seal had been received, addressed to four friends⁴ of

¹ *i.e.* in prison.

² *Leet Book*, 578. The MS. has *co'iens* and *co'ialte* throughout. Both sets printed in Sharp, pp. 235-6.

³ *Leet Book*, 578.

⁴ One of these, William Huet, probably a tailor or shereman, was one of the nine score wealthy men. In 1464, he—or one

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Laurence, who were summoned to London "to th' entent that they shuld testyfie with hym in such matier as he wold allege for his greves." And now the business went quickly forward. "Accordyng which appoyntement the day was kept at London," says the *Leet Book*, "befor the Kyngs Councell in the Sterr Chambre, the Friday next after Seynt Martyn day, and ther continied dayly vnto the Tewesday next befor the fest of Seynt Andrew . . . at which day befor my lords of Caunterbury, London and Rochestre, the chief Justice Mr ffyneux, and many other lords, the hole matier was hard at large, both the compleynt of the seid Laurence, the answer therunto, the replicacion of the seid Laurence, and the rejoinder theruppon, with the disposicions of the witnesse, and proves of the seid Laurence, wheruppon the seid Laurence was ther and then comyt vnto the Flete, ther to abyde unto the tyme the kyngs pleasur was knowen."

So Laurence Saunders vanished into the Fleet, while Boteler and the rest returned in triumph to Coventry. The corporation remained clearly masters of the field. In a privy seal,¹ received by the mayor and sheriffs the next December, Laurence's complaints were pronounced "feined and contrived," and himself a "seduciouxx" man, who had "of his great presumpcion and obstinacie not seldom but often tymes disobeyed the liefell . . . precepts of you the said mair . . . to the right evil and pernicious example of other, therby embolded and encouraged to offende in like wise." But the King willed that the laudable and prosperous governance of the city should not "surceasse or be sette aparte by the sinistre or crafty meanes of any privat personne," and so the folk of the city were commanded "for

bearing this name—had been in trouble with the corporation (*v. ante*, p. 138). "Norfolk," the name of one other, was a regular *weaver's* name in Coventry.

¹ Corp. MS. A. 79, f. 19.

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the *pretense of any right hereafter by thaim . . . to bee claymed*" to make no conspiracies and unlawful assemblies.

As for the details of the trial, of them we know nothing.¹ Boteler kept the complaint and the answer, the replication and the rejoinder, in papers, "whereof the tenor," says the *Leet Book*, "her ensuen . . . " but just at this place occurs an unlucky break. The careful and zealous town clerk was called away, no doubt, at that moment on business of the first importance; there are no further entries made; so there can be nothing told of the trial in the Star Chamber that Martinmas and of the long agony of Laurence Saunders.

¹ I am afraid that there is nothing further to be learned of Saunders. Professor S. R. Gardiner was so good as to make inquiries at the Record Office whether there were any Star Chamber records bearing upon his case, but none belonging to this period are in existence.

CHAPTER XIII

The Companies of the Crafts

THE men of Coventry, a city which, in later mediæval times, stood fourth among the wealthy towns of England,¹ gained a livelihood by the buying and selling of wool and the making of cloth.² As early as 1398 the traffic in the frieze of Coventry³ extended beyond the modest limits of the city itself. In that year two hundred pounds' worth, the export of one merchant, lay in the port of distant Stralsund, on the Baltic Coast,⁴ and in London and other places the cloth was in great request during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

The men of mediæval Coventry naturally attached great importance to the maintenance and extension of the cloth trade in view of the wealth it brought. Special buildings were set apart for the staple traffic of the city. The Drapery and the Wool-hall, both in Bayley Lane, under the shadow of S. Michael's Church, were the recognised selling places for the raw and finished material; and a small illicit market went on in the porch of the church itself.⁵ Hard by stood the Searching-house, a place devoted to the examination of all the cloth made by the city workpeople. Two weavers and two fullers,

¹ Rogers, *Six Cent.*, 116.

² In early times there was a special place in the market assigned to the sale of cloth. See *undated* deed Corp. MS. C. 40.

³ *Rot. Parl.*, iii. 437.

⁴ *Litteræ Cantuarienses* (Rolls Series, 85), iii. 81.

⁵ See above, p. 202.

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especially appointed for the purpose, overlooked the handiwork of their fellow-craftsmen; while six drapers were appointed to superintend these weavers and fullers,



TRINITY LANE

so as to guard against any exhibition of partiality or slackness in the execution of the task. If the material were sufficiently fulled and well woven, the city seal was attached to it in token of its genuine quality; but the searchers were straitly charged to warrant no piece that

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fell short of the standard excellence, and bad wares were returned to the owner to make therewith as good a bargain as he could.¹

An order of leet passed in 1518 gives very precise directions for the searching process.

“Hit is to be had in mynde that for a trueth of Clothmakynge to be had in this cite as foloweth, if it myght be folowed, and the execucion of the same to be don schortly, or els the cite wolbe so fer past that it wolbe past remedie to be recouered to eny welth or prosperite, hit is thought hit were good to have ij wevers & ij walkers sworn to make true serche of the wevers doying & also of the walkers & to present the trueth; and also to be chosen vj drapers to be maisters, & ouerseers of the doying of the serchers, that if some of them cannot a lesour to be at the serchyng at the dayes of the serchers, yet some of these vj maisters schall euer be ther. And by



ARMS OF CITY OF
COVENTRY

cause it were to great a besynes for the serchers to go to every mannes howse, hit is enacted at this lete to haue a howse of the gilde,² or of some other mannes nyghe the drapery doore, to be ordeyned well with perches to drawe ouer the clothes when they be thykked, and also weightes & ballaunce to wey the cloth, and when it cometh frome the walkers, the walkers to bryng it to the serchyng house, and to serche it, & to se it ouer a perche, and if it be good cloth as it owght to be in brede & lengh, that the cite may have a preise by hit & no sklauder, then to sett upon hit the Olyvaunt in lede,³ and of the bak of the seall the lengh of the cloth, by the which men shall perceyve

¹ *Leet Book*, 657.

² *i.e.* the Trinity guild.

³ The elephant, *i.e.* the city seal, which bears the device of an elephant and castle.

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and see it is true Coventre cloth, ffor of suerte ther is in London & other places that sell false & untrewed made cloth, & name hit Couentre cloth, the which is a gret slaunder to the cite than it deserveth by a gret partie. And if there be eny man that hath eny cloth brought to the serchyng house, what degre so ever he be of, if it be not able for the worschip of the cite to be let passe, let hym pay for the serche & lett hym do his best with hit, but set not the Olyvaunt upon it.

“And this serche to be made also this fourme,¹ that is to sey ij days in the weke, Tewesday & Saturday, and ij of the serchers to be ther from viij of the klok to a xi, and frome on to iiij of the klok; and a sealer to be ordeyned & sworne to stryke the cloth and seale hit, and wrete hit, and fynde leed, & to have a peny for his labour; and the sealles to be put in a cofre with ij keys, the master of the vj drapers to have the on, and the serchers the other, and for the serche of every cloth to the serchers to have j d. and it is to be thought every good man schal be gladd of that payment.”

The person who consistently reaped the greatest benefit from this activity was the draper, the merchant of cloth. Within the city his fellowship ranked next to that of the mercers, or merchants proper, who traded in wool as members of the Staple of Calais, or trafficked in wine and wax, which they brought in barges from Bristol.² None but the well-to-do could enter into the ranks of

¹ This system did not by any means insure good workmanship. It was noted in the middle of the century that when the make of cloth deteriorated, the clothmaking towns still set the seal upon the material, “and so abased the credit of their predecessors to their singuler luker” (Lamond, *Common Weal*, 77).

² *Rot. Parl.*, v. 569. There is a petition concerning the hindrance of the navigation of the river Severn; Coventry, among other towns, is spoken of as being injured thereby.

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the drapers' craft.¹ Some of its more fortunate brethren were able to purchase estates and take rank among the county gentry. Thus John Bristowe, draper, sometime mayor and justice of the peace in Coventry, became possessed of land at Whitley; and his son William spoke of his "manor" in those parts, and frequently described himself as a "gentleman." And John, grandson of Julian Nethermill, a city dignitary of the same craft, held lands in Exhall, and had his arms blazoned among those of the great county folk.² Many members of this fellowship have left a name showing the great power for good or ill that they possessed within the city. There was John Bristowe, mayor in the early fifteenth century, who, as the oldest inhabitants declared, "after he had boron office within the cite of Couentre thynkyng that the common people of the seid cite durst nor wolde contrarie his doying, claymed unlawfully" to have certain rights over the common pasture. John Haddon, another draper-mayor, has left a better reputation; it was he who came to the rescue of the poverty-stricken clothiers of the city in 1518,³ and by a timely loan enabled them to continue work. While John Bond, who, as his epitaph declares, gave "divers lands and tenements for the maintenance of ten poore men, as long as the world shall endure," is yet remembered as the founder of the Bablake hospital.

The near connection between these great cloth merchants and the corporation is one of the most striking features of municipal life in Coventry during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The marks of the drapers' influence in civic affairs are continually before our eyes. It was in a draper's mayoralty that ordinances were first

¹ The mercers' and drapers' apprentices were compelled to pay the admission fines on the sealing of their indentures, whereas in other fraternities these were not demanded until the period of apprenticeship was past (*Leet Book*, 655).

² *Warw. Antiq. Mag.*, pt. vi. 110.

³ *Leet Book*, 658.

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made respecting the searching of cloth.¹ And when the system of overlooking was perfected in 1518, a few years later, it was to six men of this craft, that the task of superintending the searchers' investigations was assigned. Just as, about a hundred years before that time, when an unsuccessful attempt was made by the town rulers to exercise complete control over the dyers' craft, it was suggested that two drapers as well as two dyers, in either case nominees of the corporation, should keep watch over the dyers' movements, and "present" them for any "fault or confederacy" at the court of the mayor.²

Measures framed by this body in the interest of any particular craft or class were doubtless found oppressive by those who had no lot or part in their enactment. Thus while the yea or nay of the fullers had little weight in municipal councils, the wealth of the drapers gave them a control over the local trade to an extent which we can hardly realise. The reason of this supremacy is not far to seek. The mercers and drapers in their character of wealthy men usually occupied the principal official posts in the city.³ No one, unless he were possessed of a certain amount of wealth, could rise to a high place in the corporation. Men were ranked according to the amount of property in their possession, and to speak of a citizen as "of the degree of a mayor" or "bailiff," conveyed as definite an idea as the assertion that "So-and-so has a fortune of £20,000 or £30,000," would convey to our minds at the present date.

This body of wealthy merchants, in whose hands was vested all control over the city trade, could and did

¹ *Leet Book*, 639.

² *Rot. Parl.*, iv. 75. I am indebted for the explanation of the significance of this petition to parliament against the dyers to Mrs J. R. Green.

³ The terms "degree of a mayor—of a bailiff" were used in assessing fines. In the year 1449 a list of the craftsfolk of the city enables us to find out to what calling the members of the corporation belonged (*Leet Book*, 246 sqq.).

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make and unmake regulations of the deepest significance to the various crafts. By an ordinance of the city leet they could completely alter the conditions regulating the work of salesmen or artificers, as they had an absolute control over all workers, since by the craft system all who practised the same calling were compelled to obey the same regulations. Nominally the regulations were drawn up by the crafts. In reality, as certain members of the corporation overlooked them, amending and annulling at their pleasure, this power of the crafts was held at the will of the municipal rulers.¹ And the corporation did not let their power lie idle. In the interests of the general public they forced the crafts to embody in their rules the ordinances framed by the court leet. Thus the cloth-workers were compelled to bring the cloth they had woven to be measured and examined by the searcher,² the fullers to adopt the custom of using a special mark whereby the work of every individual craftsman could be recognised and known,³ the dyers to abstain from using a certain French dye of inferior consistency,⁴ and, much against the wills of this community, to admit another member into their craft.⁵ It was not only as regards the working of their cloth, but in all other matters the crafts had to bow before the will of the corporation. Appeals to courts spiritual to punish for oath-breach any who disobeyed the ordinances of the fellowship were looked coldly on

¹ *Leet Book*. The mayor, recorder, and bailiffs were to take eight or twelve of the general council of the city, and to summon before them the wardens of the crafts with their ordinances, and these "poyntes that byn lawfull, good and honest for the cite be alowyd hem and all other throw[n] asid [*sic*], and had for none." And this order was in substance repeated many times.

² *Leet Book*, 657.

³ This rule was embodied in the fullers' rules. See *Book of the Fullers* (in possession of the fullers' company at Coventry), f. 6.

⁴ *Leet Book*, 698.

⁵ *Ib.*, 697-8.

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by the municipal rulers, and the practice suppressed. In 1518 the mysteries were compelled to make the mayor the arbiter of all cases of dispute between offenders and the wardens of their respective fellowships. If anyone committed a fault against the fellowship, he must be asked to pay a "reasonable" penalty, and "if he deny and will not pay . . . according to the ordinance . . . within three or four days, let the master ask it of him again . . . and if he deny it eftsoons and will not pay it, let the master of the craft and three or four honest men of the craft come to master mayor and show unto him the dealing of that person." Whereupon the mayor and justices, should he refuse to pay double the original sum to the craft, were bound to commit him to ward until he promised obedience. The offender on his release was to make submission to the master entreating him to be "good master" to him during his year of office, and "his good lover" in time to come.¹

We may follow in detail the dealings of the corporation with several of the crafts. The fullers seem to have combined with the tailors to form the guild of the Nativity some time in the reign of Richard II., but were prevented from acting under the terms of their charter. In the eighteenth year of the reign of Henry VI. the royal licence was renewed.² But the guild was a singularly ineffective body, holding little if any property, and soon after, possibly at municipal instigation, the two crafts who formed it were separated, though the tailors obtained a third renewal of their licence in the twenty-eighth year of Henry VIII. The

¹ *Leet Book*, 654. A part of the proceeds of the craft fines frequently went to the repair of the town wall in the early fifteenth century. Among the cappers fines for breach of regulations went "half to the mayor and half to the craft" (*ib.*, 573.)

² Corp. MS. B. 46; B. 63.

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dyers appear to have been more stubborn. Early in the reign of Henry V. they combined together to increase the price of dyeing of cloth by one-half, and to have the flower of the woad for their own use.¹ In 1475 they attempted, perhaps, to renew their old combinations of sixty years back; and five years later Laurence Saunders, a member of their calling, became the leader of the opposition which prevailed during the close of the century within the city.² In 1496 all the thunders of the leet ordinances launched against those who, of their "froward wills," refused to contribute to the furnishing of the pageants played on Corpus Christi day, failed to make the dyers join with the other crafts in paying their share.³ When the municipality desired to thrust a new member into their

¹ The corporation proposed in a petition to parliament that the twenty-four who elected the mayor should choose two drapers and two dyers to overlook the craft, and "present" them for any "fault or confederacy." See above p. 217.

² In spite of the provision for overlooking regulations, says an order of leet for the year 1475, "divers craftsmen of this city now late have made divers conventicles and ordinances unlawfully against the common public of this city. And amongst others the craftsmen of dyers' craft have made an unlawful ordinance, that is to say that none of them should colour nor dye but under a certain form amongst themselves ordained upon certain pains . . . ordained by surety of writing and oaths unlawful in that behalf. It is therefore ordained by this leet . . . the said unlawful and hurtful ordinances made by the said dyers and all other unlawful . . . ordinance made in every other craft . . . and the unlawful oaths and writings made for the same be utterly void, quashed and annulled." None were in future, the order continues, to be bound by these rules, and masters suing others of their fellowship for not obeying them were to be fined £10. The largeness of the sum, and the fact that precautions were taken to have this order proclaimed once a year, "so that craftsmen might have knowledge" of the penalties incurred by any breach of the same, prove that the corporation was thoroughly alarmed and determined to suppress the movement (*Leet Book*, 418).

³ *Leet Book*, 558.

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craft, the dyers forbade the journeymen to work for him, and it was only by circumventing their tactics that the town rulers could compel the admission of the new candidate into their ranks.

Not only the workers in cloth, but all the fraternities were forced to bow to the corporation's will. In 1436 the attention of the leet was drawn to certain malpractices which had arisen among the workers in iron. A bill, drawn up no doubt by some member of the ruling class and presented by him to the court, shows the full extent of the evil and suggests certain measures of reform. Certain workers in iron, we are told, by employing labourers of the four allied crafts of smiths, brakemen, girdlers, and card-wiredrawers, had acquired entire control over the trade, and were able to pass off ill-wrought iron upon their customers. It was suggested that labourers of but two occupations should be employed by one master instead of those of four occupations as had been the custom hitherto.

"Be hit known to you," the bill runs, "but yif certen ordenaunes of craftes withe in this cite . . . be takon good hede to, hit is like myche of the kynges pepull, and in speciall poor chapmen and clothemakers, in tyme comeng shullen be gretely hyndered, and as hit may be supposed the principall cause is like to be amonges hem that han all the craft in her own hondes, that is to sey, smythiers, brakemen, gurdelmen, and card-wire drawers, for he that hathe all thes craftes may, offending his conscience, do myche harme." A negligent smith, the bill continues, might heat the iron by "onkynd hetes," so that it became unfit for future use. "Never the later for his own eese he will com to his brakemon and sey to hym: 'Here is a ston of rough iron the whiche must be tendurly cheryssheth.'" When the brakeman has done his task, the metal comes to be sold for making fish hooks. "And when hit is made in hokes and shulde serve the ffissher to take fische,

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when hit comythe to distresse then for febulnes hit all-to brekithe, and thus is the ffisher foule disseyved and to him grete harme.” And if the iron be used for making girdles, the master passes it to the girdleman with these words: “‘Lo, here is a stryng or ij (two) that hathe ben misgouerned atte herthe, my brakemon hathe don his dever; I prey the, do now thyne.’ And so he dothe as his maister biddethe hym.” Or it may be passed on to the cardmaker, who finds that it “crachithe and farithe foule; so the cardmaker is right hevy therof, but neverthelater he sethe be cause hit is cutte he must nedes helpe hym self in eschueing his losse, [so] he makithe cardes¹ ther of as well as he may, and when the cardes ben solde to the clothemaker and shuldon be ocupied, anon the tethe brekon and fallon out, so the clothemaker is foule disseyved. Wherefore, sirs,” is the conclusion of the bill, “atte reverens of God in fortheryng of the kynges true lege peapull, and in eschueng of all disseytes, weithe (weigh) this mater wysely, and ther as ye see disseyte is like to be, therto settithe remedy be your wyse discreSSIONS.” For, as the petitioner suggested, if the two crafts of smiths and brakemen, and these only, were united on the one hand, and the two crafts of girdlers and card-wire-drawers, and these only, on the other, “then hit were to suppose that ther shuld not so myche disseyvabull wire be wrought and sold as ther is.” For if the crafts were severed in this manner, it was argued, then the girdlers and cardmakers would buy their wire from the smiths, and look well to their bargain. “And if the card-wiredrawer,” the petitioner proceeds, “were ones or thies disseyved withe ontrewē wire, he wolde be warre, and then wold he sey vnto the smythier, that he bought that wire of: ‘Sir, I hadde of you late badde wire, sir, amend your honde, or in feithe I will no more bye of you.’ And then the smythier, lest he lost his

¹ *i.e.* combs for combing wool.

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customers, wold make true goode; and then withe the grase of godd (God) the craft shuld amend and the kinges peapull not disseyved with eontrewe goode.”¹

The mayor, we learn, on this important occasion sent round to all the worthy men of the leet to take their advice upon the matter. Either the corporation sought an occasion of humbling the workers in iron, or the common sense expressed in this bill was irresistible; for the leet fell in with the arrangement of severing the crafts. A number of master smiths agreed to employ only journeymen of this occupation and brakemen, while the cardmakers on the other hand undertook to find occupation for girdlers and cardmakers only. Furthermore, the leet decreed that their two last-named crafts should by “no colour ne sotell imagynacion ‘sell or buy’ no cardwyre ne mystermannes wyre, the whiche may be hynderying or grevyng to the kinges lege pepull ‘under pain of £20.’”

The craftspeople, however, occasionally resented municipal interference, and endeavoured by all means within their power to get the control of the industry in which they were engaged into their own hands. Any temporary weakness or disorganisation on the part of the corporation was taken advantage of by these fraternities. It was in 1456, when the finances of the city were in some disorder, owing to the expense of entertaining the Court and the active support given by the city to the Lancastrian cause, that the craftspeople took occasion to sue in spiritual courts offenders who had broken the rules observed by members of fellowships.

“Discord daily falleth in this city among the people of divers crafts”—such are the words of an order of leet passed in 1457—“because that divers masters of crafts sue in spiritual courts divers people of their crafts, affirming they have broken their oaths made in breaking divers their rules and ordinances, which rules oftymes

¹ *Leet Book*, 181-2.

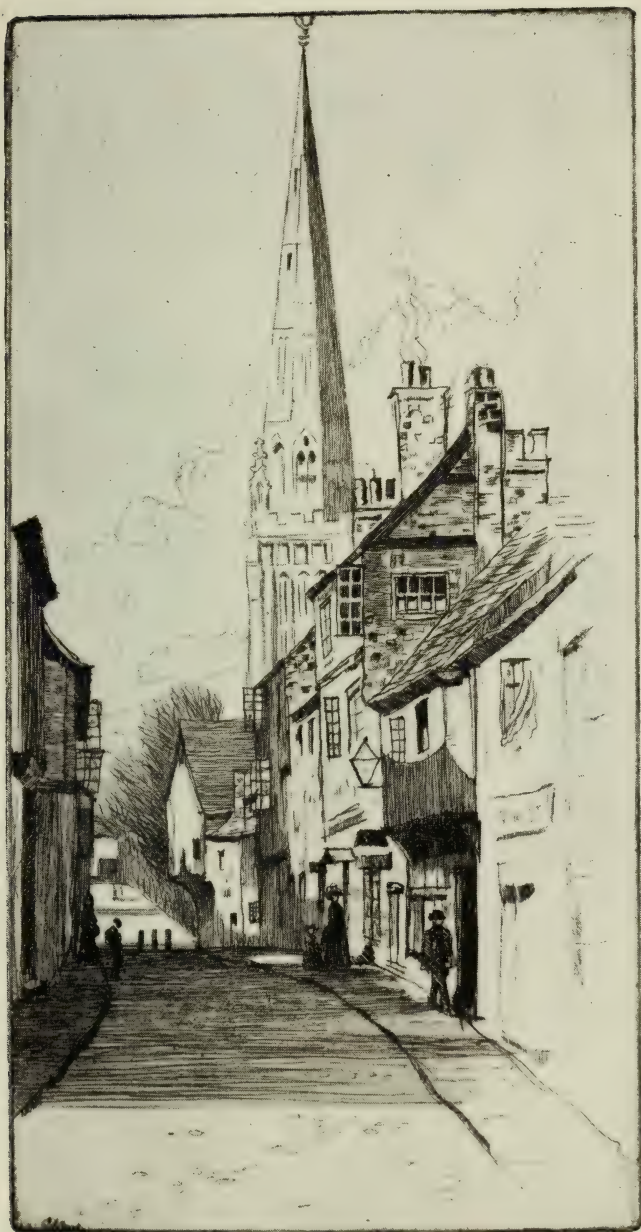
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be unreasonable, and the punishment of the said masters over excess, which, if it continue, by likelihood would cause much people to void out of the city." The masters were thenceforth forbidden to bring "any manner suit, cause or quarrel in any court spiritual against any person of their craft," until "the mayor for the time being have heard the matter and variance . . . and have licensed the suit to be had."¹ But though defeated in this scheme, the crafts doubtless did not give up the battle. The dyers' attempt in 1475 to form confederacies happened in a time of great division within the town respecting the enclosure of the common pasture. And the same disputes agitated the community twenty-one years later, when a member of the party of discontented craftsmen nailed up inflammatory verses on the church door, taunting the corporation with injustice and inveighing against the rules they had made for the buying of wool and selling of cloth.

And indeed it may have been well that persons high in authority curbed the self-seeking spirit of the crafts. These bodies, formed early in the thirteenth century for mutual help and preservation, had since degenerated into close corporations eager to exclude competition at any price.² Fettered as they were by ordinances fixing price, hours of labour and the like, there was so little free play allowed the craftsman in the management of his business, that the difficulty of acquiring wealth must have been great. Each company of craftsmen practically monopolised all the traffic or business connected with their special calling in the district in which they lived,

¹ *Leet Book*, 303. In 1515 the crafts were commanded to give in their books so that the fines might be moderated at the mayor's discretion. A refusal to give in the books of regulations was to be visited by a fine of 100s. New rules were also to be enregistered in the mayor's book, and a 20s. fine taken from any craft for every month that a rule had been observed without the mayor's knowledge and licence (*ib.*, 645-6).

² Green, *Town Life*, ii. 100.



NEW STREET

The Companies of the Crafts

and were bound to take good heed that the numbers of those who formed their body should not be greatly increased, lest the individual profits should be reduced. They were resolved at all hazards to guard against competition. The trade of the town might support ten tanners for instance, but the admission of an eleventh or twelfth into the craft might endanger the older members' prosperity. Thus, in 1424, the weaver showed a distinct dislike to allowing their members to take any number of apprentices,¹ who were potential masters of the craft; and the cappers who in the fifteenth century had risen to be a very important body, allowed each master to take but two apprentices only, and when one departed before his serving-time of seven years was accomplished, the master was forbidden to take another in his place, without licence from the keepers of the craft, until the allotted time should be past.² The corporation, however, wished to break down this exclusiveness, and in 1524 declared that any member of what craft soever might receive what number of apprentices he would "notwithstanding any ordinance to the contrary."³ Some twenty years later, finding perhaps that this sweeping measure aroused too much opposition, the leet tried to thrust a modified form of it on the cappers.⁴ Twice within a few months [1544-5] they decreed that any master of the fellowship might take an extra apprentice when one of them had served five and a half of the allotted seven years and they repeated the order after a few years' space.⁵

¹ *Leet Book*, 92.

² *Ib.*, 573. In a later version of the rule (*Ib.*) this matter is worked out in detail. Each apprentice put in surety in £5 to perform his covenant. If the lad broke it, it was only by handing over the £5 to the craft that the master could immediately take an apprentice in his place.

³ *Leet Book*, 687.

⁴ *Ib.*, 774, 778.

⁵ *Ib.*, 792. The masters of crafts exercised a particular form of oppression in forcing apprentices to take oaths on entering their service (*cf.* "the unlawful oaths of the dyers")

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The craftspeople had another method for keeping would-be members out of their ranks. They demanded on admission such fines as could only be paid by the well-to-do. And it was owing to their jealousy that precautions were taken to ensure the payment of these admission fines. Trouble came about, we are told, because new members departed from the town just when the fine was due, a year after setting up their shop. They were henceforth to be compelled to pay half their fine at setting up, and to put in two sufficient sureties that the second half should be paid at the end of the first year.¹

It was part of the policy of the town rulers to recognise the apprentice's possible future citizenship, and withdraw him somewhat from his master's authority. The lad was therefore forced by the ordinance of 1494² to take the oath "to the franchises," and bring his twelve pennies to the steward for the town use when his term of service began. We see from the list of those who took the oath in 1495 that the apprentice lived in his master's house, serving him usually—though not invari-

perhaps to the effect that they would not set up in business after their apprenticeship was over. The craft masters were forbidden by leet to cause others to take an oath on "any point of their occupation" under penalty of a fine of 100s. "without any pardon" (*Ib.* 654).

¹ *Leet Book*, 690-1 (1525). The fines for admission varied with the different crafts. The cappers took from strangers 26s. 8d. and 13s. 4d. from town apprentices—payments extending over four years, but nevertheless so high as to prevent the poorer class from entering the craft in question. In 1518 the leet determined to overcome the crafts' exclusiveness. Fines were then fixed for apprentices at 6s. 8d., payable at setting up shop, and for strangers at 10s., of which 5s. was paid at the end of the first year, and 5s. at the end of the second year after starting business (*Ib.*, 574, 655). The mercers' and drapers' apprentices paid the fine at the sealing of their indentures.

² *Ib.*, 553-4. For the discontent this act called forth see p. 201.

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ably—for seven years' space. He earned a nominal sum, perhaps a shilling, or even 4d., the first six years, and a larger one, perhaps 10s. or 13s. 4d., during the seventh. Thus the son of John Preston, of Stafford, "gentleman," who was apprenticed to a grocer, earned 12d. a year, the wages of his last year of service—the ninth—being unfixed; while another lad, learning the same trade, received 13s. 4d. as his last year's earnings. The son of a Durham "husbandman" took from his master, a hat-maker, 4d. a year for six years, and 6s. 8d. during the seventh. The crafts seem to have made it their business to see that the boys were properly cared for. If any one of them complained that his master did not give him sufficient "finding," *i.e.* food and raiment, the offender was to receive first an "admonition," and on the repetition of the offence to pay a reasonable fine; if matters did not mend, the lad was to be removed and placed elsewhere.¹ The master exercised a superintendence over the apprentice's moral well-being. In an early indenture of the time of Richard II. the lad promises to haunt neither taverns nor houses of ill-fame, nor hold illicit intercourse with any of the women of the household.²

No doubt the number of apprentices was limited partly in order to prevent any one master from engrossing more than what was deemed his fair share of trade and profits. The craftspeople were very sensitive on this point. Thus, in 1424, quarrels arose between a certain John Grinder on the one side and his fellow-members of his craft of weavers on the other. The fact that Grinder wove linen as well as cloth, and had two sets of looms for the purpose,³ had aroused the jealousy of the other weavers of the city. It may be remarked that this weaver was a man wise in his generation. He gained his cause and made his fortune, and filled

¹ *Leet Book*, 671. Such was the rule among the cappers.

² Corp. MS. F. 2.

³ *Leet Book*, 92-3.

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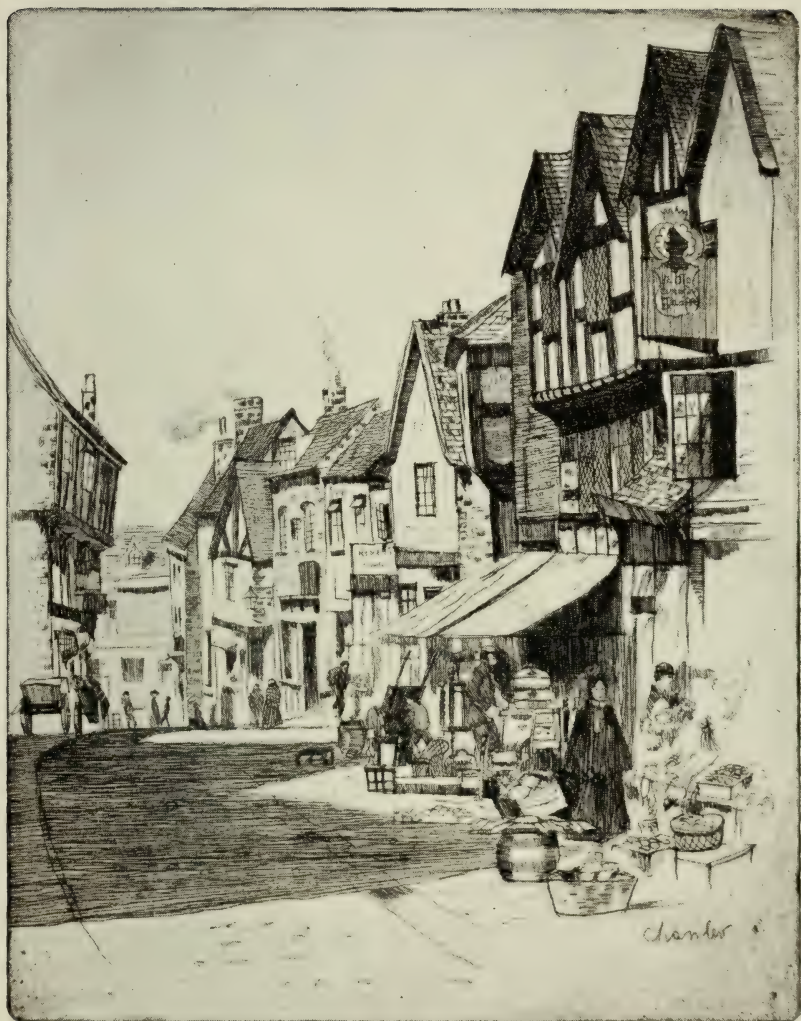
the post of bailiff some time before 1449, being apparently the only man of his calling during the second quarter of the fifteenth century who ever occupied a high municipal office. Many precautions were taken to prevent undue rivalry between brethren of the same fellowship. It was usual among the artisan crafts for the member to report the closing of a bargain to the master or keeper of his fraternity.¹ And no other member of the calling could come between the contracting parties until the work was finished.² But among the more powerful craftsmen means were often taken to defraud their brethren of the poorer sort. By collusion between butchers and tanners the latter were able to buy raw hides "in grete," or wholesale, with the intention, no doubt, of reselling them at a profit to others of the craft, a practice the corporation forbade under a penalty of forty shillings, to be taken from buyer and seller alike.³ When any excessive profit was to be made, the public, then as now, was fair game. In Coventry, as elsewhere, ale-wives gave short measure, and used an unsealed cup. The clothmakers stretched out broadcloth to the "high displeasure of God and deceit of the wearers" to a length the material could ill bear. Of all these matters the corporation took cognizance, inflicting fines, punishing by the pillory, or in extreme cases by loss of the freedom of the city.

There was one point, however, on which all employers were agreed, and that was on the advisability of checking unions and combinations among their workmen for the purpose of obtaining better wages. The journeymen's, or, as they were called, "yeomen's" guilds, which seem to have been fairly universal at the close of the fourteenth and during the fifteenth century, appear in Coventry with

¹ The member was "to warn" the master, who was to warn the other members of the fellowship (*Carpenters' Accounts*, Corp. MS. A. 4).

² Under penalty of 6s. 8d.

³ *Leet Book*, 557.



BUTCHER ROW

The Companies of the Crafts

great frequency and persistence. Three several times the corporation obtained patents against the formation of guilds other than those already existing in the city.¹ The patent for the suppression of the first of these combinations that comes before our notice, the fraternity of S. Anne, is addressed to the mayor and bailiffs, in 1406, and relates how it had come to the ears of the government that a certain number of youths, serving men of the tailors and other artificers working by the day called journeymen, gathered together in the priory, or the houses of the friars, and formed a fraternity called the fraternity of S. Anne, to the end that each might maintain the other in their quarrels. This action was likely, in the opinion of those in authority, to breed dissensions in the city, do great harm to the societies founded of old time, namely, the Trinity and Corpus Christi guilds, and hence bring final destruction upon the townsfolk. The meetings were declared unlawful, and all who persisted in assembling to hold them after the patent had been openly proclaimed were to be arrested, and their names certified to the King, who would have them punished according to their deserts.² But, in spite of this warning, the journeymen did not give up the conflict, for the fraternity had again to be crushed in the first year of Henry V.,³ only to reappear in 1425 under the title of the guild of S. George.

Connected with this last movement was the discontent which affected the journeymen weavers in the year

¹ Corp. MS. B. 35 (18th Nov. 8 Hen. IV. 1406); B. 38 (8th Mar. 1 Hen. V. 1414); B. 47 (25th Jan. 19 Hen. VI. 1441).

² Corp. MS. B. 40 (22nd Nov. 8 Hen. IV. 1406).

³ Corp. MS. B. 41 (8th Mar. 1 Hen. V. 1414). These last two deeds are misdated—though with a query—in Mr Jeaffreson's catalogue. A comparison of the dates of the patents of general prohibition with those for a particular suppression will show that they were executed in one instance on the same day, in another instance within an interval of four days.

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1424. Indeed it is possible that the whole company of journeymen within the city were at that time making demand for higher pay. The weavers had a bond of union in a common fund which they apparently appropriated to the furnishing of altar or processional lights, a pretext possibly like that of the journeymen saddlers in London in the time of Richard II., who, under "colour of sanctity" and religious meetings, "sought only to raise wages greatly in excess."¹ The movement among the Coventry weavers assumed all the forms of a modern strike. The men not only refused to serve at the usual wages, but hindered others from filling their place. The corporation took the matter in hand, and the question was finally settled by arbitration. The men were forbidden to hinder any of their fellows from working for their masters as they had done aforetime, and a regular rate of wages was established, whereby the journeymen took a third of the sum paid to their employers for the weaving of each piece of cloth, while the masters were ordered to exact threepence and no more from their workmen as a fine for each "contumacy," being, however, forbidden, under colour of this rule, to oppress their servants.²

Nearly a hundred years later we find that the fraternities of journeymen were still in existence, albeit jealously watched by the masters of the crafts. In 1518 all initiative was taken from them. "No journeymen of what occupation or craft soever," runs the order of leet, shall "make or use any *cave* or bylaw, or assembly, or meetings at any place by their summoner without license of the mayor and the master of their³ occupation" upon pain of 20s. at the first fault; at the second the offender's "body to prison," there to remain until the master and six honest persons of his occupation would speak for him.⁴ At the same time the workers'

¹ Ryley, *Memorials*, 543

³ MS. his.

² *Leet Book*, 94.

⁴ *Leet Book*, 656.

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fraternities were ordered to bring in the rules already made for the mayor's inspection. But the attempts on their part to form closer unions in order to facilitate concerted action still continued, and in 1527 we find the dyers' serving men assembling together for the apparently pacific purpose of attending marriages, betrothals, and burials, as if "they had been a craft or fellowship." These meetings served most likely as a cloak to more serious proceedings, and they were forbidden by the leet.¹ Nor was the movement entirely confined to the workers of the crafts; it spread among those outside the guild organization. In 1518 the daubers and rough masons were forbidden to form a fellowship of themselves, but were henceforth to be common labourers, "and to take such wages as are limited by statute."²

In other matters we may see the discontented attitude of the workfolk. Thus the journeymen cappers objected to the lengthening of the hours of their working day, which in 1496 had been fixed to last from six till six, but which by 1520 was further increased by two hours in the summer-time, thus lasting from five in the morning to seven in the evening.³ Six years later it was enacted that, unless they kept these hours, it was permitted to any master to "abridge their wages according to their time of absence." Any rivalry in trade between masters and men was crushed whenever the masters' power availed to do so. Thus in 1496 the journeymen cappers carried on a contraband trade, and scorning to be content with the permission to "scour and fresh old bonnets" for that purpose, made new caps for sale; nor did the imposition of a fine of twenty pence at every default avail to check their activity. Therefore according to the rules of 1520, members of the craft were forbidden to give any work to those who knitted the

¹ *Leet Book*, 694.

² *Ib.*, 653.

³ *Ib.*, 673. The winter hours were also increased. The workmen came at 6 a.m. and left at 7 p.m.

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journeyman's caps, or to the spinners who span for them, thus indirectly checking this illicit competition. In other ways the journeyman was made to feel the weight of the master's hand. Among the carpenters none could be set to work unless he had served for seven years as apprentice to the handicraft;¹ and a journeyman capper was compelled to certify the cause of leaving his late master to the satisfaction of the masters of the craft.²

These are some points connected with the life of mediæval craftsmen. Although so much has been written on the economical, social, and religious aspects of the subject, we are still very ignorant as to the actual workings of the craft system. Modern industry seems to have entirely passed through, and, as it were, forgotten this immature phase of its existence. The companies in Coventry which were able to survive the shock of the suppression of the guilds and chantries under Edward VI., and have lasted to our own day—the mercers, drapers, cappers, fullers, clothiers, and worsted weavers—possess none of the powers or organization of their predecessors, and are mere survivals of a bygone time, “the shadows of a great name.”

¹ *Carpenters' Accounts* (Corp. MS. A. 4).

² *Leet Book*, 574.

CHAPTER XIV

Daily Life in the Town—the Merchants and the Market

AT the “beating of the bell called daybell,” the townsfolk rose and began their daily work. Country people, wayfarers and chapmen, bearing their burdens of merchandise, saw the city in the morning light, with its ring of walls and upstanding posterns and gates overtopped by six tall spires, lying in the midst of fields and far-reaching common grounds in a slight dip in the plain. Entering the newly-opened gates, they were at once inside the narrow paved ¹ streets, bounded on either side with black and white timbered houses, for travellers from the Warwick side did not make their entrance by spacious Hertford Street, ² but by the Grey Friars’ and Warwick Lanes, then part of the main thoroughfare of the city. Passing up the hill, they found that the street on a line with these—the Broadgate—belied its name, being but a very narrow thoroughfare, bounded on the left hand by a block of houses, whereof the removal in 1820 ³ has caused moderns to think that the open space on the crown of the hill is very rightly named.

Soon after daybreak the streets were alive with the noise and press of a busy throng. It is true there were

¹ Rough stones were used for paving (Riley, *Liber Albus*, xliv.). The *Chamberlain’s Accounts* (Corp. MS. A. 7) contain frequent allusions to paving: “Item, paid for paving within the Bablake gate, iiis.” “Item, ii lods pebuls for the same, xviiiid.”

² Built 1812 (Poole, *Coventry*, 345).

³ Poole, 345.

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many impediments to traffic. Cattle¹ and ducks wandered hither and thither; fishmongers' stalls stood in the middle of the streets, greatly to the hindrance of the passers-by, whether horsemen or pedestrians;² while inn signs³ had perforce to be limited in length, lest they should strike the heads of unwary riders in the by-lanes of the city. But the mediæval trader was well inured to inconvenience. Neither did noise distract him, though taverners and cooks standing at the door offered good things hot from the oven to passers-by, each seeking to cry louder than his neighbour; while in the open places the crier proclaimed the terms of a recent charter, or newly-made ordinance of leet or council;⁴ and overhead the church bells pealed forth, calling folk to their prayers, to the market, or, in case of a brawl or riot, to a common meeting-place.⁵

Long before curfew the countryman had gone home to his village in the Arden country or by the London

¹ "Daily hurt" comes from having goats at large (*Leet Book*, 361). In London only the swine of S. Antony's hospital were allowed to be at large in the streets, and "chiens gentilz," i.e. dogs belonging to the gentry (Riley, *Liber Albus*, xlii.).

² *Leet Book*, 306.

³ In London the length of inn-signs was limited to seven feet (*Liber Albus*, lxxv.). Signs were also affixed to shops to attract the eye; of this custom the barber's pole is a relic. Merchandise was usually kept in cellars partly underground beneath the solar or front dwelling-room. In great thoroughfares goods were displayed in covered sheds projecting in front of the dwelling-place (Turner, *Dom. Arch.* i. 96; iv. 34). Shops were usually open rooms on the ground floor, with wide windows closed with shutters (*Liber Albus*, xxxviii.).

⁴ *Leet Book*, 272, 100.

⁵ We hear of the "daybell" rung probably at dawn, and the curfew rung by the clerks of S. Michael's and Trinity churches (*Ib.*, 338). A "larum bell" was rung on the occasion of the quarrel between Somerset's servants and the watch (*Paston Letters*, i. 408). Probably there was a recognised "change" in the ringing for each of the various summonses. The ringing of changes is said to have been peculiar to this country. Bells, before they were hung up, were baptized and anointed with



OLD HOUSE BESIDE S. MARY'S HALL

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road to Dunsmoor Heath; while the traveller in his inn and the townsman under his own roof were soon abed. What light there was in the deserted streets on winter evenings came from the lamps which hung over the door of every hostelry and every substantial citizen's house, until nine o'clock,¹ after which time the city gates were closed,² and none were abroad save thieves and watchmen. Indeed, the very fact of being out after dark was in itself presumptive evidence of some dishonest purpose on the part of the belated wayfarer. At any suspicious sight or sound the watch were on the alert, and prepared to arrest the wanderer; should the prisoner escape and take to flight, they would instantly give chase, and fill the dark and empty streets with the echoes of their pursuit. A hue and cry would be raised, doors open, and householders pour forth to aid the watch. If the unlucky fugitive were captured, he would be committed to ward in all haste.³

What a crowd of different types of men must have jostled against one another in the noisy throng! Craftsmen, attired in the livery proper to their calling, a custom whereof we have this day a relic in the butcher's blouse; merchants from foreign parts, or natives fresh from a sea voyage; mayor and aldermen clad maybe in festal scarlet; the crier and sergeants in the livery of the city; men-at-arms, the retainers of some great lord, bearing the badge of the Earls of Warwick, or the

holy oil, blessed and exorcised. Their uses were expressed in the Latin lines:

“Laudo Deum verum—plebem voco—congrego clerum
Defunctos ploro—pestum fugo—festa decoro.”

(Strutt, *Sports and Pastimes*, 291, 292.)

¹ *Leet Book*, 234.

² In 1450 the chamberlains requested that four men should be appointed out of each ward to guard the gates, and these four were to choose one man to keep the keys and close them every night at nine (*ib.*, 254).

³ Jusserand, *Wayfaring Life*, 169.

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Stafford knot ; Benedictines, clad in white cassock and black gown and hood ; Franciscans, with their brown habit and knotted girdle ; Carmelites from Whitefriars in white frock and brown scapulary ; Carthusians from the Charterhouse, with white cassock and hood ; chantry and parish priests—all these, laymen and clerics, warriors and traders, met, passed, and gave greeting in the streets.

Strange figures might be seen in the streets or the road neighbouring the city, such as the hermits, whose dwellings—the one by Bablake church,¹ the other at Gosford Green—stood at either end of the highway leading through Coventry. Times had changed ; it was now customary for hermits to build by the highway, and no longer withdraw into solitary places, and spend their lives in prayer and meditation. They rather preferred to dwell in “boroughs among brewers,” seeking society and good cheer. Nor did the pilgrims, who might be seen flocking to the shrine of S. Osburg² or to the image of Our Lady in the Lady Tower on the London Road hard by the Whitefriars’ to pay their devotions, invariably set about their task in a religious spirit. Many who travelled to the far-famed shrines of S. Thomas of Canterbury, S. Edmund of Bury, S. Cuthbert of Durham, or to “Our Lady” of Walsingham, to the Roods of Chester and Bronholme, or the Holy Blood of Hales, looked on their journey as a holiday jaunt rather than as an act of devotion. The author of *Piers Plowman* thought little spiritual good came from this gadabout religion. The Lollards were wont to condemn pilgrim-

¹ Sharp, *Antiq.* 131. In 1362 licence was given to a recluse, Robert de Worthin, to inhabit a dwelling adjoining the church.

² Miracles were worked at S. Osburg’s shrine, and her birthday was a local holiday. Palmer Lane and the Pilgrim’s Rest preserve in their names token of ancient customs. For the wooden image of our Lady of the Tower see Fretton, *Memorials of the Whitefriars’ Monastery*, Harris, Troughton Sketched, 6.

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ages, and one John Blomstone of Coventry, a heretic, examined in 1485 declared:—

“That it was foolishness to go on a pilgrimage to the image of Our Lady of Doncaster, Walsingham, or the Tower of Coventry, for a man might as well worship by the fireside in the kitchen as in the aforesaid places, and as well might a man worship the Blessed Virgin when he seeth his mother or sister, as in visiting the images, because they be no more but dead stocks and stones.”

Interesting, too, are several persons occurring in



Coventry history, whose occupations were hardly so legitimate as those of pilgrim or hermit. We have had a glance at the ruinous house where John de Nottingham, the necromancer, by means of his waxen effigies wrought such terrible evil to one of the prior's servants, and revenged the wrongs of the Coventry men. We would fain know more of John French, the alchemist, who appears in the *Leet Book*,¹ only to disappear directly from its pages. We learn in 1477 that he intended, "be his labor, to practise a true and profitable conclusion in the cunnying of transmutacion of meteals to" the "profyte

¹ *Leet Book*, 422.

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and pleasur" of the King's grace, and was, so Edward IV. charged the mayor, never to "be letted, troubled, or vexed of his seid labor and practise, to th' entent that he at his good liberte may shewe vnto vs, and such as be by vs therfor appointed, the cler effect of his said conclusion." There can be little doubt that the citizens looked askance at John French, and whispered that he dabbled in black magic and had dealings with the Prince of Darkness. We know not how many years the alchemist spent in his fruitless labours; or if he imparted his views on the subject of the "transmutation of metals" to the citizens, or ever journeyed to London to pour a tale of hope deferred into the ears of the disappointed King.

There were many sights in a mediæval city to remind us that men seldom cared to cloak their brutality in those days. The stocks, where offenders were held by their feet, the pillory, where they were held by the head and hands, stood conspicuous, probably in neighbourhood of the guild-hall. A pillory, a favourite place for the chastisement of fraudulent bakers, may yet be seen in Coleshill, and stocks stand yet on many a village green.¹ Here the great punishment lay in the shame of exposure: the criminal stood for hours unable to move, a pitiful target for the derision of the multitude. The like penance was imposed on those who suffered at the cucking-stool, followed by ducking in water, a highly disagreeable incident in the punishment. The prisoners in the gaol looked out into the highway, and perhaps held conversation with their friends as they passed. Now and then a craftsman might be seen among the debtors pursuing his calling, for it was not thought expedient to bring a man to utter destitution by depriving him of the means of livelihood during imprisonment; and those who chose might cobble shoes or work at the

¹ There is a specimen at Berkswell, near Coventry, and at Malvern.



ORIEL WINDOW AND STOCKS. S. MARY'S HALL

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loom during those monotonous days. Hard by the busy worker might stand a felon, traitor, or murderer, his mind full of gloomy thoughts of his coming end.¹ The gallows, naturally reared on high where all men might see them and their ghastly burden, were probably in sight of the prison; and rich and poor crowded to see a condemned man drawn in a tumbril, or executioner's cart, to the gallows, or a woman exposed to open shame. "It is ordained," an order of leet ran, "that William Rowett, capper, and his paramour be carried and led through the town in a car, in example of punishment of sin, and that all other that be proved in the same sin from this time forward shall have the same pain."² But these were only a few among many unpleasant sights that would attract the notice of a passing stranger. Heads of traitors stuck on the top of long poles often adorned the gates. Part of the body of Jack Cade was sent down in 1450, no doubt to breed terror into all disloyal beholders, and in 1470 the head of one Chapman³ was set up on the Bablake gate; while that of Sir Henry Mountford, an adherent of Perkin Warbeck, shared the same fate in 1496.⁴ Gosford Green was the Tower Hill, and the Little Park the Smithfield of Coventry. At the former place Lord Rivers and his son suffered death under Warwick in 1469; while the latter saw the burning of many martyrs, including the famous Marian victim, Laurence Saunders.

¹ *Leet Book*, 643. The prisoners paid the gaoler 1d. a week for their lodging when they had their own bed, 3d. a week if the gaoler provided them with one; over and above, debtors paid the gaoler 5d. for fee, if the debt for which they were liable exceeded 40d.

² *Ib.*, 192. See also for punishment of immorality, *Ib.*, 219

³ Harl. MS. 6388, f. 22. The other lists have Eliphane. I have no doubt that the right reading is Clapham. This man was an ally of Warwick, and led the rabble of Northampton to the battle of Edgecote in 1469. He was beheaded next year.

⁴ *Ib.*, f. 25.

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Many were the efforts made to keep the place clean and wholesome to live in ; but frequent appearances of the plague show that they met with but partial success. At the awful visitation known as the Black Death there remained not "the tenth person alive," we are told, to bury the dead ; ¹ while in 1479 the plague is said (without doubt exaggeratively) to have carried off 3300 of the inhabitants.² Filth of every kind was deposited in the Cross Cheaping under the magnificent cross itself, much incommoding the folk who thronged to the marketplace, "to the danger," the leet jury complained, "of infection of the plague," and by sweeping the pavement there dust was raised, which did "deface and corrupt" the said cross.³ In that half of the city wherein the prior held sway the people put all the refuse of their houses just outside the Cook Street gate, with the result that when the country people did not come to carry it away to manure their fields, the lord prior could not "have his carriage through his orchard."⁴

According to orders of leet, however, a better system should have prevailed. The sergeants collected every quarter a penny from each citizen dwelling in a house with a hall door, and a halfpenny from every shop, to provide a cart which carried away the filth from the streets.⁵ Moreover all the citizens were enjoined to clean that portion of the pavement which lay in front of their dwellings every saint's day under payment of a fine of 12d. This order was hardly a popular one, and the sergeants were continually taking distress from those who would not pay the quarterly cart-rate, or raising fines for the omission of the festal cleaning. For the

¹ Harl. MS. 6388, f. 8. A slight exaggeration, no doubt.

² *Ib.*, f. 23.

³ *Leet Book*, 775.

⁴ *Ib.*, 447

⁵ *Ib.*, f. 11. The filth and street sweepings were ordered to be carried "beyond the stake set in the dyke beyond the Friars' Gate," or to pits without the gates (*ib.*, 30).

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good folk evaded all sanitary regulations whenever they might do so with impunity. As for those misdoers who threw filth into the common river, to inquire concerning them was a hopeless task.¹ This was, as the mayor and corporation owned to prior Deram when he loudly complained thereof, one of the worst evils of the city. Coventry seems, however, never to have fallen into such an evil plight as Hythe did in the fifteenth century. Here, owing to the abominable habit of casting refuse into the streets, to say nothing of blocking them with all imaginable obstructions,² they were more like evil-smelling swamps than highways fit for traffic.

Measures, somewhat primitive in character,³ were taken to guard against an outbreak of fire, which so frequently wasted mediæval cities, where the plaster and timber of the houses, with their projecting storeys almost touching one another across the narrow streets, afforded excellent fuel for the flames. A stone house was a rarity, and in the fifteenth century bricks were as yet not in general use. The leet forbade the building of wooden chimneys or the roofing of houses with straw in lieu of tiles.⁴ Moreover late mayors and other officers with "commoners of thrift," were forced to provide leather buckets, "such as the aldermen think sufficient" to hold the water wherewith to quench the flames. In order to prevent the supply of water—brought in a leaden pipe from a spring without the city⁵—from being exhausted, a lavish use of it was not permitted. The

¹ *Leet Book*, 455. The worthy men of the leet besought the mayor that there might be certain citizens appointed to have oversight of the river, each in their several district, and that the rules for cleaning it should be duly kept (*ib.*, 108).

² Such as timber frames for houses, trunks of trees, etc. (Green, ii. 29, 30).

³ In London the bedels of each ward had a hook to tear down burning houses (Riley, *Liber Albus*, xxxiv.).

⁴ *Leet Book*, 389.

⁵ The spring was called Cunduit Head (Corp. MS. C. 227).

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conduits, whereof there was one in Cross Cheaping, and another, called the Bull, probably by the Bablake Gate,¹ were kept locked during the night, and brewers were forbidden to take water thence for their brewing, or any one to wash linen and clothes therein.² The practice whereby individuals, by means of a grant sealed with the common seal, obtained a licence to take water continually from the conduit for their private use, was looked on most unfavourably, and finally forbidden by the leet.³ No doubt the people who wished to obtain this permission were the wealthy brewers and victuallers who were answerable for so many disturbances in Coventry.

For here as elsewhere this important class of town-folk made great profit out of the "pence of the poor," in spite of law and ordinance. One of the great problems facing mediæval legislators and local authorities was the task of ensuring the natural price of provisions. "No police of the Middle Ages," says Thorold Rogers, "would allow a producer of the necessities of life to fix his charges by the needs of the individual, or, in economical language, to allow supplies to be absolutely interpreted by demand. The law did not fix the price of the raw material, wheat or barley. It allowed this to be determined by scarcity or plenty—interpreted, not by the individual's needs, but by the range of the whole market. But it fixed the value of the labour which must be expended on wheat and barley in order to make them into bread and ale."⁴ The central government ordained what weight of bread was to be sold for a certain sum, and what price should be given for a gallon of ale; and the enforcing of the law was the business of the local authority. The local rulers them-

¹ There is still a yard called Cunduit Yard close to Bablake church.

² *Leet Book*, 208, 338.

³ *Ib.*, 157.

⁴ Rogers, *Six Cent.* 140.

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selves fixed the price of other provisions—fish, meat, poultry, and wine—allowing for profits according to a certain scale on their resale by victuallers.¹ Stringent rules were laid down against the enhancement of price by “forestalling and regratery,” that is intercepting merchandise on the way to market and selling it at an increased price. For example, native fishmongers, it was feared, would lay in wait for travelling salesmen bringing in “panyers” of salt fish, and, after buying the same, would ask a higher price for it before the next fasting day. So to guard against this contingency, strangers selling fish were forbidden to be “osted or inned” in the house of a native brother of the craft, but to pass the night at inns at the mayor’s “limitation,” and after “making relation” to him of the kind of fish they brought, to sell the same openly in the common market-place.² A multitude of regulations were also made to ensure the good quality of provisions, the mayor examined all fish brought by foreign fishmongers, whilst ale-tasters, appointed by the bailiff, summoned by each brewer to taste his new beer, received “a gallon of the best ale” at the detection of any default. In addition to all these expedients for regulating price and quality, the statute-book provided for the giving of a just quantity to the buyer at the conclusion of every bargain. On each opening day of a new mayoralty all shopkeepers and victuallers delivered up their weights and measures for the mayor’s inspection, and after comparison with the standard model, kept in the town chest, they were sealed if found correct, or, if faulty destroyed.

On his entry into office, the mayor’s “crye” or proclamation informed all and sundry of these regulations, and of the perils consequent on their infringement.

¹ Green, *Town Life*, ii. 36. Profits on wine were in some cases 2d., in others 4d. a gallon.

² *Leet Book*, 33.

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Here we learn the price of “coket” bread¹ and horse-bread at that time; how white wine of Rochelle was to be sold at 6d. a gallon, Malvoisey at 16d., and “no derer upon the peyn of xxxs. at every trespas,” and that on Oseney, Algarbe and Bastarde the “mayor and his peres” would set a price when any occasion of selling offered.² The “crye” tells us what penalties were laid on those who made use of fraudulent measures, “coppes and bollys” unsealed,³ and how informers were stimulated by the promise that whosoever gave notice to the mayor of this abuse should “have iiiid. for his travayll and a galon of the best ale” and also what hard punishments were meted out to those who practised forestalling and regratery.⁴

But in spite of all these regulations the task of curtailing profits seemed a hopeless one, and again and again the worthy men of the leet confess that the law remains a dead letter through the frauds of the victuallers. These, we are told, holding their heads high, refused to sell their wares at the “limited” price, “and in maner destitucion the seid cite of wyne and vitayle” to the manifest hurt of the inhabitants and of all people “confluent to the same.” While, when the mayor insisted that the bakers should obey the orders of leet regulating their trade, the whole craft “struck” with the greatest unanimity, and leaving the city “destitute of bread,” took sanctuary at Bagington, a village about four miles distant. Night, however, brought counsel, and they submitted next day to the mayor, paying for their lawlessness a fine of £10.⁵ As for the brewers in the sixteenth century, they found their calling so lucrative that others were thereby encouraged to forsake their

¹ *Leet Book*, 23. The three most common kinds of bread were *wastel*,—bread of the finest quality; *coket* (seconds); and *simnel*, twice-baked bread, used in Lent (*Green*, ii. 35).

² *Leet Book*, 24.

³ *Ib.*, 25.

⁴ *Ib.*

⁵ *Ib.*, 518-9.

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occupations and take up this profitable trade. At that time, said the worthy men of the leet in 1544, "divers of the said brewers nothing regarding the displeasure of God, the danger of the laws of the realm nor the love and charity which they ought to bear to their neighbours nor the commonwealth of this city, for their own private lucre . . . do . . . regrate and forestall barley coming into this city to be sold," and sell ale at excessive and unreasonable prices.¹

Regulations, however, affected this powerful and wealthy class but little, and in listening to the ever-renewed complaints against them we begin to realize the universal detestation in which they are held in the Middle Ages. Mediæval imagination, with its love of the grotesque, delighted to picture the unhappy end of those who bade defiance to the laws of God and man. How hardly shall an alewife, thought the Ludlow artist, "enter the kingdom of Heaven," and in carving the *miserere* of the parish church he shadowed forth her fate. "A demon is bearing away the deceitful one; she carries nothing about her but her gay head-dress and her false measure; he is going to throw her into hell-mouth, while another demon is reading her offences as entered in his roll, and another is playing on the bag-pipes by way of welcome."² A pleasant man was that Ludlow artist,—one, we may fancy, who abhorred cheating, and dearly loved his glass.

Ordinances of leet were frequently passed upon the order to be maintained upon a market day, for there was but scanty room for traffic in the Cross Cheaping, even though the carts can have been no wider than trollies, taking up but "the brede of a yard" in passing by. Stalls and boards were a great encumbrance. "No fishmonger," runs an order of leet, "(can) have his board standing forth at large in the street for to let cart, horse or man, but that there be a reasonable space left . . . between

¹ *Leet Book*, 771.

² Wright, *Domestic Manners*, 337.

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their houses and their boards.”¹ Round about the market-place were clustered the dwellings of provision merchants and the lesser craftsmen. Ironmonger Row, Butcher Row or the Poultry, Cook Street, and the Spicer-Stoke² tell by their names the calling of those who lived or chiefly trafficked there ;³ while the drapers made their homes hard by the Drapery, in Bayley Lane and Earl Street.⁴ On market days this neighbourhood was crowded with the overflow of stall-holders and salesmen ; the poulterers standing before the Priory gates, and round about the Bull-ring “usque finem de le Litel Bochery,”⁵ while the fishmongers and leather sellers had stalls within the Cheaping itself.⁶ Other stalls were placed in the procession way in S. Michael’s churchyard, and the sellers of cloth had an illicit market in the church porch opposite the Drapery door, until it was made forbidden ground by a leet ordinance. For all merchants and chapmen resorting to the city on the Friday were forced by this authority to sell all their mercery, cloth, and linen inside the Drapery ;⁷ and all sellers of wool to have their merchandise weighed at the Wool-hall hard by, and pay a fee for the weighing thereof at the “Beam” or public weighing machine.

¹ *Leet Book*, 306. Probably carts made for town use were always narrow ; see illustration in Wright’s *Domestic Manners*, 344. Compare the trollies made for the “Rows” at Yarmouth.

² The old name for the thoroughfare between Trinity church and Butcher Row. A spicer is equivalent to the modern grocer.

³ Cf. Milk Street, Fish Street and S. Margaret Pattens in the city of London ; Bridlesmith Gate and Fletcher Gate (fletcher=an arrow maker) in Nottingham. See on this subject Mr Addy’s *Evolution of the House*. It was customary for the members of each calling to live close together.

⁴ Poole, 396.

⁵ *Leet Book*, 233.

⁶ *Ib.*, 798.

⁷ See Corp. MS. B. 75 for description of the Trinity guild lands, of which the Drapery was a parcel. The annual rent payable to the Trinity guild of a half bay in the Great Drapery was 6s. 8d. (C. 194).

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Equally stringent were the orders of leet, which curtailed the privileges of the "foreyn," who came to buy or sell within the city. He was not allowed to purchase corn in the market until mid-day, three hours after the townsfolk had been admitted to make their bargains.¹ A certain time of sale was assigned him,² and very frequently his goods were examined by the mayor ere he could dispose of them in the market. If his trade competed in any serious degree with that of the city craftsmen, there was no end to the restrictions where-with he was hampered. Urged by a spirit of local monopoly, the authorities regulated the trade in hides and tallow in favour of the dealers of the city, though on the butchers' assertion that the country tanners would give a better price for the hides than their town brethren, the rules were somewhat relaxed. No chandler, however, was permitted to sell more than twelve pounds of candles out of the city³ to one purchaser.

The frequent enactment of these and similar regulations in the early sixteenth century shows the terror with which the townsfolk looked on the spread of industry in country districts. Owing to the conversion of arable land to pasture for sheep farming, agricultural labourers had been thrown out of work; many therefore were employed in handicrafts in their own houses and their competition was thought to seriously threaten the prosperity of their town neighbours.⁴

At the Corpus Christi fair all was bustle and activity in Coventry, and the mayor had doubtless much ado to settle all the disputes arising from differences of currency or hard driving of bargains at the pypowders court, for all the world of the neighbourhood came to

¹ *Leet Book*, 666. All people dwelling outside the town liberties were called "foreign."

² For regulations concerning "foreign" bakers, *ib.*, 717, 799.

³ *Leet Book*, 646.

⁴ Rogers, *Six Cent.*, 340

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lay in stores for the year, and merchants from far and near to sell their wares. Eight weeks a year of a farmer's life is said to have been spent more or less at fairs and markets,¹ and undoubtedly a merchant employed a far longer period in travel to and from these centres of trade. Our forefathers were not altogether such simple stay-at-homes as we love to picture, but, rather, experienced travellers, and in those days travelling meant experience, and was not as it is now—at least in civilized countries—a method for getting from place to place which puts no tax on the body, and the least possible on the mind of the traveller. All manner of men and of merchandise² were to be seen at the fair. Irish traders brought druggets from Drogheda; coarse cloth came from the west country;³ Frenchmen brought dyes for cloth; Bristol traders wine from Guienne and Spain; country gentlemen and local graziers bales of wool for export or home manufacture.

It is true that in spite of its popularity, the Corpus Christi fair never equalled the S. Giles' fair at Winchester, the centre of trade between the southern counties and France, or that of Stourbridge, near Cambridge, the great mart for horses, and the centre of commerce between the eastern counties and Flanders. To many, however, the fair at Coventry, the centre of traffic on the great road to the north-west, was the chief event of the whole year. The local makers displayed to the utmost advantage the bales of Coventry cloth, and the blue thread, to which the skill of the native dyers gave the colour which was the envy of the whole country. This merchandise could be bought openly by the

¹ Rogers, *op. cit.* 152. In Leicester there were no pleas held when the great merchants were absent at fairs (Green, ii. 25).

² Merchants from Dublin, Drogheda, London, and Kingston-on-Hull, were members of the Corpus Christi guild; so were many local country gentlemen and yeomen.

³ Devon and Ireland supplied coarse cloth sold in the Drapery (Burton MS. f. 98-103).

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strangers, who jostled against one another before the stalls in the Drapery. But many transactions, which the dealers hoped would not come to light, must have taken place unnoticed in the busy crowd. The prior of Sulby, in terror of the rapacity of Henry VIII., sold his cross-staff to the wife of a London goldsmith at Coventry fair one Corpus Christi day, just as the monks of Stoneley—provident men—about this time disposed of a silver censer, and other things “worth £14 or thereabouts,” to Master John Calans, goldsmith, of Coventry.¹ May-be the spare scholar might there be seen, as at the fair of S. Frideswide, at Oxford, counting the few coins his purse contained to find out if they would avail to purchase a book he coveted greatly. While in Elizabeth’s days Puritan purchasers, who found the “Martin Marprelate” tracts edifying reading, could obtain these locally printed attacks on the episcopate from some discreet salesmen.² But the bulk of the buyers were local folk: farmers on the look-out for a good horse, or intent on replenishing the stock of sheep-dressing, and their wives keenly enjoying a bargain over some pewter vessels, or article of “mercery,” a gay belt or kerchief for the daughters at home.

More important transactions than these frequently took place, and not at fair time only but throughout the year, as the records of the mayor’s court of Statute Merchant clearly show. The amount of the various purchases was, when viewed from a mediæval standpoint, very large; a “gentilman” of Attleborough, for instance, in 1415, acknowledges that he is bound to

¹ Gasquet, *Monasteries*, ii. 285. This took place shortly before the dissolution.

² The “Marprelate” printing press was for some time at Coventry (Morley, *Sketch of Literature*, 431). Rogers thinks unlicensed books were sold at fairs. “I cannot conceive how the writings of such an author as Prynne could have been disposed of except at the places which were at once so open and so secret” (*Six Gent.*, 149).

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certain Hinckley folk and others "in ducentis libris" (£200 sterling), while a Dublin merchant, Dodenhall, without doubt a connection and kinsman of the Coventry mayors of that name, owed in 1394 a fellow-merchant of the latter place £210, money which he did pay before distress was levied upon him. The following, however, would be a more usual example of recognition of debt: "On the eighteenth day of the month of February, in the third year of King Henry the Fifth after the Conquest, at Coventry, William Lyberd, hosier, of Coventry, acknowledges that he is bound ("recognoscit se teneri") to Thomas Dawe of Coventry, passenger, in sixteen pounds sterling, payable at Coventry at the feast of S. Michael the Archangel next ensuing."¹

When all the bargaining was over, when the debt had been duly paid, or the amount enrolled at the mayor's court, men thought of other things. The "commons" of Coventry could discuss the everlasting "Lammas" question with the Nottingham men, while those who took more interest in national politics whispered to one another complaints against abuses in Church and State. They hinted darkly at the cause of the death of the "good" Duke Humphrey, condemned the malice of the Yorkists, the scandals of the archdeacon's court, or lifting their eyes to the defaced monastery and cathedral,

¹ Corp. MS. E. 6. This court was kept in accordance with the Statute of Merchants of 1283. A merchant had the power of bringing a debtor before the mayor, when the debtor bound himself to pay the debt by a certain day; if he failed to do so, the mayor caused all his movables to be seized to the amount of the debt and sold. If, however, he had no movables within the mayor's jurisdiction, application was made to the chancellor, who caused a writ to be sent to the sheriff within whose county the debtor had movables, ordering these to be seized. If the debtor had no movables, he was detained in prison until terms were made, the creditor meanwhile providing him with bread and water, the cost of which was added to the amount of the debt (Ashley, *Econ. Hist.* pt. I. 204).

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spoke of the high-handed character of the "King's Proceedings."¹

The nightly sojourn at inns was a great feature of the wayfaring merchant's life, for it was only in sparsely-peopled districts that monasteries afforded hospitality to the travelling trader.² "Strangers and baggers of corn between Yorkshire, Lancashire, Kendal, and Westmoreland and the 'bishopric,'" the people of the north declared at the dissolution, "were greatly helped both horse and man by the said abbeys; for never was in these parts denied either horse-meat or man's meat, so that the people were greatly refreshed by the said abbeys, where now they have no such succour."³ But the majority of wayfarers sought shelter either at inns or at *herbergeors'* houses, for the private citizens, even the richer merchants, frequently increased their gains by the entertainment of travellers. The public inns were often the scene of gambling and intrigue, and unwary guests, who had not the wherewithal to discharge the heavy bills they had been induced to contract, frequently found their baggage seized to several times the amount of the debt. "The greater barons and knights were in the custom of taking up their lodgings with herbergeors, rather than going to the public hostels; and thus a sort of relationship was formed between particular nobles or kings and particular burghers, on the strength of which the latter adopted the arms of their habitual lodgers as their signs."⁴ It might still be possible to

¹ Rogers thinks that rebellions were often planned at fair time.

² Rogers *Six Cent.* 136-7; Ashley, *Econ. Hist.* pt. I. 98.

³ Gasquet, *Monasteries*, ii. 96. It seems that the amount of assistance rendered to wayfarers by monasteries has been much exaggerated.

⁴ Wright, *Domestic Manners*, 333-4. Larwood and Hotten assign another reason for this practice. Great men's town houses were frequently let during their absences from home (*History of Signboards*, 4).

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learn the story of the connection between certain noble houses and the inhabitants of a given district by means of inn-sign heraldry ; while from the same source we could gather a hint of popular political feeling at a later date. The jubilant cavalier would swing his sign of the *Royal Oak* at the Restoration, and the staunch adherent of the "Great Commoner" flaunt his *Old King of Prussia* in the next century, just as surely as the mediæval inn-keeper decorated his sign with the *White Hart*, *White Boar*, or *Bear and Baculus*, in honour of his patrons Richard II., Richard III., or the Earl of Warwick. Famous old inns in Coventry were the *Crown*, in "platea vocata Brodeyatys" hard by the Langley's inn, the *Cardinal's Hat*, in Earl Street.¹ The *Peacock*, still existing in the last century, was in the Broad Gate, but the locality of the *Angel*, where Stafford, Duke of Buckingham, lodged, is unknown. One authority speaks also of the *White Rose*, of late years the *Roebuck*, still standing in Little Park Street, where the Yorkists held rendezvous, and the *Red Rose* in Much Park Street, a meeting-place for Lancastrians.² The herbergeors frequently received distinguished guests. Henry VII., after a triumphal entry into Leicester on his way from Bosworth field, came to Coventry, and took up his lodging in the house of Robert Onley, the mayor, at the Bull, in Smithfield Street, a visit he repeated in two years' time, when he conferred on his host the honour of knighthood.³

The Coventry merchants, like their fellows in other towns, had plentiful dealings with the outside world. The Botoners, whom tradition credits with the building of S. Michael's spire and charcel, held intercourse, it seems, with the men of Bristol, for they married a daughter of their house to a native of those parts, and she became the mother of the chronicler, William

¹ Corp. MS. C. 202 ; *Leet Book*, 386.

² Fretton, *Mayors of Coventry*, 10.

³ *Ib.*, 12 ; Poole 403.

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Worcester.¹ As the traders of a later generation, the Botoners, most likely, conveyed their wine and wax in vessels towed up the River Severn, a journey beset with difficulties, as the towing-path was overgrown with brushwood, and private landowners and corporate towns on the river bank demanded tolls from the passers-by.² The Bristol men, too, were not averse from straining a point in the matter of tolls, and in spite of the grants of freedom the Coventry men possessed, demanded "cayage" from them,³ when their goods were upon the landing stage. Many times did Adam and William Botoner serve in the mayor's office, and their donations to the church, to town guilds, murage funds, and the like are numberless. As for the great tower of S. Michael's steeple that the brothers built, tradition credits them with spending £100 every year for twenty-one years upon the work.⁴ In the early part of the fifteenth century the family entered the ranks of the country landowners by the purchase of an estate at Withybrook. Not only at Bristol, but at Southampton, the chief port of the south, where French dyes were sold, did Coventry men carry on a great part of their trade. And William Horseley, mayor in 1483 and member of the dyers' craft, brought about an agreement between the men of this port and his fellow-citizens in 1456, whereby mutual freedom of tolls was secured.⁵

But the trading enterprise of these inland-dwelling townsmen was not confined to their native country merely. Another family, the Onleys, whereof one John Onley, the founder, was mayor of the Calais Staple,⁶

¹ *Paston Letters* (ed. Gairdner), I. cxiii. Worcester often preferred to call himself by his mother's maiden name

² *Rot. Parl.*, v. 569.

³ *Leet Book*, 550.

⁴ Sharp, *Antiq.*, 61. It seems an incredible sum, and the statement should be received with caution.

⁵ *Leet Book*, 302.

⁶ Harl. MS. 6388, f. 13. Onley is said to have been the first Englishman born in Calais after it was taken by Edward III.; his father was a standard-bearer in the English army.

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had dealings with merchants beyond the sea. This foreign intercourse was often beset with danger to life and limb. John Onley, son of the above, was apprenticed to one Thomas Aleyn, a London mercer. When travelling to Bruges in 1413, where the chief staple for cloth then was, on his master's errand, this apprentice fell into the hands of a goldsmith of that place, who, because he could not obtain redress for the treatment he and his goods had received from an English "roberdesman" in the neighbourhood of Dover, kidnapped and kept John Onley as hostage. At last the good folk of Bruges, fearing the anger of the English, forced him to let the apprentice go.¹ Our sympathies are divided between the innocent lad and the outraged goldsmith, for in the wilder parts of England "roberdesmen" were a veritable scourge to the foreign trader. Did not Henry III. hang more than sixty of the brigands of Alton, who had plundered certain merchants of Brabant, though the whole county of Hants conspired to ensure the acquittal of the accused?² Occasionally the highwaymen also attacked English folk. In the days of the third Edward, there was a pretty gang, composed chiefly of "gentlemen born," who beneath the shelter of Cannock Chase did much harm to the merchants of Lichfield, and apportioned what spoil they took "to each according to his rank."³

But foreigners were quick at reprisal when debts were owing to them, or any injury had been done by English merchants. And the proud traders of Lübeck and Bergen, members of the Hanseatic League, who warred with and dictated to kings, were especially sensitive in this respect. This may be seen by the fate which befell Laurence Cook, afterwards twice mayor of Coventry, in the days of his apprenticeship to William Bedforth, and Thomas Walton, servant to John Cross, another local

¹ *Proceedings Privy Council*, i. 355.

² Rogers, *Six Cent.*, 99.

³ *Archæological Journal*, iv. 69.

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merchant, who aided in the erection of S. Mary's Hall. For in 1398, as they lay in the ship of one Thomas Herman, of Boston, in the port of Stralsund, certain allies of the League, who had some grudge against the English traders, fell upon the apprentices, beat and wounded them *minus juste*, taking moreover from the ship 240 dozen pieces of cloth of divers colours, Bedforth's property, valued at £200; "much merchandise" belonging to Cross, worth half the sum, and other pieces of cloth, exported by a third Coventry merchant, valued at £50.¹ Such incidents as these were not uncommon in the lives of mediæval merchants, and for the making of a successful trader it was necessary that a man should have a dash of the warrior and a great deal of the adventurer in his composition. Trained by exposure to such perils by land and sea as nowadays only explorers undergo, it is little wonder that they proved themselves keen, energetic, and resourceful in their civic life.

The servant of one Mr Wheatley had a happier adventure than Laurence Cook when in the sixteenth century he undertook a journey to Spain. For, wishing to purchase steel gads, he bought a chest at a fair, and lo! when it was opened it was found to contain ingots of silver, treasure brought perhaps from over the Spanish main. The servant, not knowing of whom he bought them, Mr Wheatley—honest man—kept them for a time, but as no inquiry was ever made, he gave the profits, amounting with contributions from the city to £96 a year, to the maintenance of twenty-one boys at a school at Bablake, an institution which exists and thrives even to this day. This benefactor, the "Dick Whittington" of Coventry, is a person of whom we would gladly learn more. The real Sir Richard, "thrice Lord Mayor of London," was, as historians tell us, not the poor friendless wanderer of legend, but the hopeful son of a well-to-do family of the country gentry, and was

¹ Sheppard, *Litteræ Cantuarienses* (Rolls Series, 85), iii. 81.

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apprenticed to a wealthy London merchant by his kinsfolk after the orthodox fashion.¹ But as yet no historian has deemed it necessary to investigate Mr Wheatley's early career, and we still believe that he came to Coventry as a nameless adventurer, "a poor boy



OLD BABLAKE SCHOOL

in a white coat," as Dugdale says. He died a bachelor, and bequeathed his fortune to charity.²

But Mr Wheatley was not the only benefactor the city knew. Wealthy merchants were generous givers, and the education of youth and provision for the

¹ Besant and Rice, *Sir Richard Whittington*.

² Dugdale, i. 194.



FORD'S HOSPITAL

Daily Life in the Town

sick and needy were not matters held to be solely within the Church's province. The names of Richard Whittington and John Carpenter¹ of London, and of Cannynge of Bristol, deserve ever to be held in remembrance, and there are hundreds of other half-forgotten donors entitled to an equal fame. Thomas Bond, merchant of the Staple, founded at Bablake a hospital for ten men "and one woman to look after them," the candidates to be chosen on a general day of the Trinity guild, and, as bedesmen of this omnipotent fraternity, to repeat three times a day Our Lady's Psalter for the brethren of the guild. Both Bond's almshouse and that erected by William Ford, merchant, and William Pisford, at Greyfriars, still remain, and are among the few perfect specimens of domestic architecture of the sixteenth century that we possess. The latter, first enriched by Ford's will in 1509, contained six men and their wives, the nominees of the Trinity guild, each couple receiving 7½d. a week for their maintenance.²

But it was not the welfare of the aged alone which absorbed the charity of these merchants. To John Haddon, draper, is due the honour of initiating the system of granting loans to young freemen to aid them in beginning commercial life. By his will (1518) he bequeathed £100 to be distributed among men of the drapers' fellowship—poor clothmakers the *Leet Book* calls them—in loans of £5 each, to enable them to buy wool or cloth, for the cloth trade at that time was undergoing a period of great depression in Coventry, and £100 to be similarly divided in £4 loans among young freemen of all occupations; all loans, free of interest, to be repaid at the end of first year.³ His

¹ The City of London school was founded on Carpenter's devise.

² Poole, 292-301.

³ *Leet Book*, 658; Fretton, *Mayers*, 14.

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example had numerous imitators;¹ but undoubtedly the gifts of Sir Thomas White, mayor of London and founder of S. John's College, Oxford, whom Mary knighted for his loyalty at the time of Wyatt's rebellion, surpassed the rest. At the time of their greatest need, in 1543, he lent the corporation £1400, wherewith they purchased certain lands and tenements confiscated at the Reformation, and they agreed to distribute £40 arising from the rents of the tenements in loans to apprentices of the city for nine years' use.² From some cause or other, probably by reason of his great and numerous acts of benevolence, and the backwardness of the corporation in paying a promised annuity, Sir Thomas fell into poverty in his later years, and seems to have been utterly cast down by the thought that his wife would be left without provision. "Whereas I have gently written unto you heretofore," he writes in 1566 to the mayor and corporation, "to let my wife have her annuity of £46 for part of her jointure, I require you as you shall answer before God at the day of judgment that you lett my wife have £24 assured to her during her life." Two days after another letter betrays his unbearable anxiety on this subject. If the mayor and corporation are not able to perform the undertaking with regard to the jointure, "I shall even," he says desperately, "cast my colledge for ever . . . so am I utterly shamed in this world and the world to come."³ Happily for the cause of "true religion and sound learning," the college was not abandoned, and we will hope the Coventry folk fulfilled their contract.

Long before the Reformation and Mr Wheatley's gift the sons of the Coventry burghers attended school, for it is an error to suppose that the education of the

¹ Thomas White, alderman and vintner, of Coventry, Henry Over, and others.

² Poole, 303

³ Corp. MS. A. 79, f. 63.

Daily Life in the Town

laity began with the grammar schools founded by Edward VI. Indeed these foundations were but the "fresh and very inadequate supply of that which had been so suddenly and disastrously extinguished" ¹ at the Reformation. Nor was the occupation of teaching confined to the monasteries. The trading-class in or before the fifteenth century threw themselves heartily into the work of providing schools for the coming generations. In most cases the support of these institutions was committed to the leading local guild. In London alone nine grammar schools were set up in the reign of Henry VI.,² and in many other places the bounty of some well-to-do bishop or merchant enriched country towns with the endowment of a grammar school. At Coventry there was, it is true, a school at the priory for the "children of the aumbry,"³ but it appears that there were other "teachers of grammar" in the city, whose well-being was a source of anxiety to the leet, and to these, perhaps, the citizens preferred to send their children to be instructed in the Latin tongue. In 1426 it was enacted by leet that "John Barton shall come to the city of Coventry, if he will, to keep a grammar school there."⁴ Barton, however, if he came at all, probably soon made way for a successor, for in 1429 we find an order of leet to the effect that "Mayster John Pynshard, skolemayster of grammer, shall have the place that he dwellethe inne for xls. (40s.) be yere, whyles that he dwellethe in hit, and holdyth gramer

¹ Rogers, *Six Cent*, 165. Leach in his *Schools of the Reformation* gives this theory substantial support.

² Green, ii. 13-16. The drapers had a school at Shrewsbury, the merchant-tailors in London. The guild of S. Laurence of Ashburton had charge of the grammar school, founded by Bishop Stapeledon in 1314. Other schools—as far as we know—not immediately connected with guilds were at Hull, Rotherham, Ewelme, Canterbury, Reading, Appleby, Preston, Liverpool, Cambridge.

³ *Leet Book*, 190; *Vict. Coun. Hist. Warw.* ii., 318. ⁴ *Ib.*, 101.

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skole hym self ther inne.”¹ The prior appears to have looked upon these teachers as the rivals of the conventual schoolmasters, but the corporation did their best to soothe his jealousy, and in 1439 the mayor and six of the council, at the request of the leet, went to the prior to “commune” with him concerning this matter, “wylling hym to occupye a skole of gramer, yffe he lyke to teche hys brederen and childerun off the aumbry, and that he wolnot gruche ne move the contrari, but that every man of this cite be at hys fre chosse (choice) to sette his chylde to skole at what techer of gramer that he likyth, as reson askyth.”² No doubt the town school continued to prosper, for we find at the time of the suppression of the chantries of 1543 that the Trinity guild paid £6, 13s. 4d. as a yearly salary to the schoolmaster. All this general activity in education goes to prove that the men of the later Middle Ages were not the illiterate boors historians have loved to imagine. The knowledge of reading, writing and Latin, or, as they called it, grammar, was surely very widely diffused, when not only a multitude of scribes, but farm bailiffs could make, audit and balance accounts in that language.³

Not only were the citizens called on to support by their charity almshouses and schools, and to furnish loans for youthful enterprise, but the poor made a constant demand on their bounty, and in the sixteenth century poverty was greatly on the increase. The town rulers were confronted with a problem which, then and subsequently, has been found incapable of solution—the problem of the “unemployed.” In the reign of Henry VIII. a terrible influx of vagabonds from the country set in, wellnigh driving the local rulers to distraction. Here we first gain some glimpses of a surplus population

¹ *Leet Book*, 118.

² *Ib.*, 190.

³ Rogers, *Six Cent.*, 165; *Agric. and Prices*, iv. 502. Even artizans could draw up accounts.

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of shiftless, landless, moneyless folk, driven by the decay of tillage to seek work in the towns. These families, together with the whole labouring class, were later reduced to unspeakable poverty by the debasement of the coinage and depreciation of silver, circumstances which, while affecting wages but little, greatly increased the price of food. This difficulty was at first unfamiliar to men's minds. Society had been hitherto somewhat stationary. Individuals lived and worked where their fathers had lived and worked before them, or at least remained in a town where they had been able by a seven years' apprenticeship or by purchase to obtain civic rights. But townspeople were jealous of granting freedom to any but the well-to-do, who would be able to share the burden of taxation, and the wanderer, who by quitting home had dropped out of the framework of local society, became one of a herd of vagabonds liable to be punished according to the utmost rigour of the law.

The town rulers did not attempt to solve this question, they shelved it. This wretched population was perpetually ordered to "pass on." "And those bygge beggers," says an order of leet passed in 1518, "that wilnot worke well to gete their levyng, but lye in the felds and breke hedges and stele mannys fruyte . . . let theym be banysshed the town, or els punysshe theym so without favor, that they shalbe wery to byde therin."¹ And again and again aldermen were exhorted to cause "lusty beggars and vagabonds" to "voyde out of their ward" upon pain of imprisonment.² Only such impotent and needy beggars as were licensed, and had the city seal, the sign of the elephant, on their bags, were allowed to remain and demand charity.³ But the worthy men of the leet did not refuse to aid those

¹ *Leet Book*, 658

² *Ib.*, 652.

³ *Ib.*, 677. "A token of ther bagge of the signe of the Olyfaunt."

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who suffered undeservedly from the acutest misery. "If any by infirmity or multitude of children be not able by his labour to sustain his family," the aldermen were ordered to provide for their sustenance out of the town chest.

CHAPTER XV

Daily Life in the Town (continued)— Religion and Amusements of the Townsfolk

HIGH above market-place and churchyard, above booth and stall, and the life and movement of a busy crowd, rose a forest of magnificent spires, three from the cathedral and one from either parish church. And after the day's chaffer many a busy trader would turn aside and enter the long aisles to listen to the chanting of vespers or tell his beads before the image of his patron saint.

In these days of tempered enthusiasm and lukewarm local interest we can hardly realise what a source of joy and pride these churches were to the townsfolk. Self-denial had enabled them to raise these goodly buildings, which they gave of their best to beautify. The painters, masons, carpenters, and carvers of the city did the work; the red sandstone, which, alas! so soon crumbles and decays, came from the local quarries; and though the grand outline of S. Michael's may be due to some bishop of the thirteenth century,¹ the design of the building, with which we are now familiar, came from the brain of a local architect—some parish priest, perhaps, or master mason of the city. For the churches of Trinity and

¹ Perhaps to Bishop Patteshull, who died 1238. Beresford, *Diocesan Hist. Lichfield*, 127.

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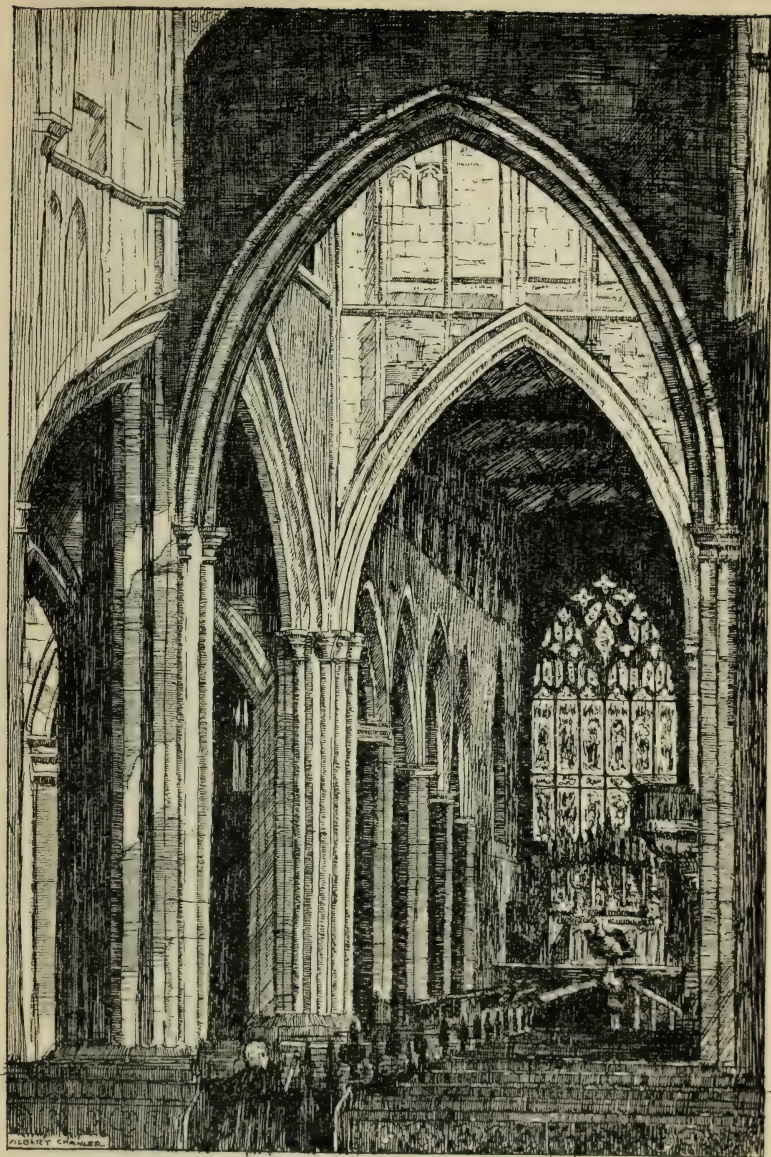
S. Michael's were practically built anew from their foundations, neither perhaps by one family of merchants, but by the whole body of parishioners in the hey-day of the city's wealth,¹ while the small collegiate church of S. John the Baptist was raised by the Trinity guild. All these show the influence of the new "Perpendicular" style; but S. Michael's more than the rest is a triumph of the amazing lightness and technical skill so characteristic of the architecture of the fifteenth century—a style which, though lacking the strength and mystery of the earlier Gothic of the thirteenth century, has yet a certain majesty of its own.

Having once built the churches, the townsfolk made provision for continual prayer and supplication to be held therein. With a touching belief in the efficacy of prayer, even vicarious, and a business-like intention of making the best of both worlds, these worthy men devoted large sums to the support of chantry priests, who, while their patrons were engaged in secular business, prayed for the souls of the faithful departed and for living members of the town guilds and brotherhoods.² In the lady chapels of S. Michael's the priests of the Trinity guild chanted daily the "Antiphones of the Virgin" and the psalm *De Profundis* on behalf of the founders of the fraternity.³ Similarly a priest said mass at the altar of Our Blessed Lady in Trinity church "for the good estate of King Richard and Anne his Queen,

¹ In 1391 the prior agreed to pay an annual pension of 100s. for eight years and to provide six trees if the parishioners would rebuild the chancel of Trinity church at their own charge, providing the materials and paying for workmanship (Sharp, *Antiq.*, 71).

² Besides parochial chaplains there were six chantry priests at S. Michael's in 1522; two at Trinity; a warden and seven secular priests at Bablake; and, at the Reformation, according to one account, fourteen or fifteen chaplains at S. Nicholas' church (*ib.*, 5, 72, 129, 132).

³ *Ib.*, 25.



HOLY TRINITY CHURCH

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the whole realm of England, and all those by whom this altar is sustained . . . and for their souls after death," remembering especially his patrons, the brethren of the Corpus Christi guild.¹ The dyers' and drapers' priests had their appointed task, so had the chaplains of S. John the Baptist's and S. Nicholas' churches, while the bedesmen, as their name implies, in the almshouse offered daily prayers for the welfare of the members of the Trinity guild.

But the good folk were not content with offering their supplications by proxy. Although much of the spiritual fervour of the thirteenth century died away in the later Middle Ages, the townsfolk were methodical and regular in their religious observance and attended church with due decorum on Sunday and holy-days. In the pews sat the city officers and their wives each in their degree, the various craftsmen occupying no doubt the special chapels called after their names, and the apprentices and servants sitting or standing "in the alleys."² The walls of the churches were bright with fresco, where even the most ignorant could learn the stories taken from the lives of the saints or from Holy Writ; it is only within living memory that the smoke has blackened a rediscovered representation of the Last Judgment above the chancel arch of Trinity church. And when the worshippers lifted their eyes to the window-glow they beheld amid the company of the saints scenes taken from local legend, the old compact for the freedom of the market between Leofric and Godiva, the blazoning of the arms of founders and benefactors, and the insignia of trade and craft.³ For the mediæval artist saw no firm line sundering the things of religion from the affairs of daily life, and the people did not care to keep their civic patriotism and inspirations solely for

¹ Sharp, 81.

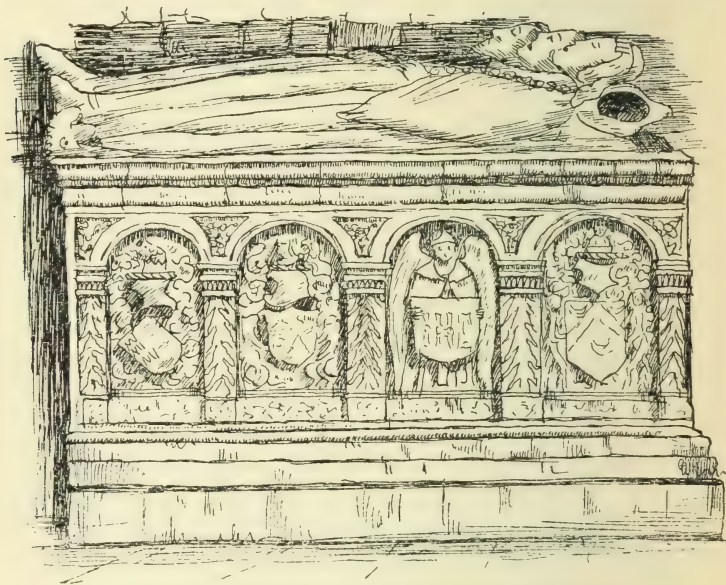
² Green, i. 154.

³ The scissors of the shearmen may yet be seen in a clear-story window in S. Michael's.

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the guild-hall. In the aisles and chapels lay the most honoured of the city dead; Bond and Haddon were laid among their fellow drapers, and the tomb of Ralph Swyllington, recorder, may yet be seen on the mercers' side in S. Michael's church.

The craft companies paid an annual rent for the chapels within their keeping, whither they repaired at



SWILLINGTON'S TOMB, S. MICHAEL'S CHURCH

least once a year to keep the festival of their patron saint and present their offerings. Thus each of the cappers subscribed twelve pence a year towards the maintenance of the furniture in S. Thomas's chapel in S. Michael's, and presented a penny as an offering on the feast of the translation of the saint.¹ In these chapels, where the

¹ Sharp, *Antiq.*, 30. The girdelers paid 3s. for their chapel to the churchwardens (*ib.*, 33). The company of the cappers is still in existence; and one day in every year the members repair to the parvise adjoining the chapel and eat bread and butter and drink wine there.

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glory of goldsmiths' and artist's work testified to the munificence of the craftsfolk, dead members of the brotherhood were occasionally buried, and their *obits* or anniversaries kept.

It was a common practice to bequeath house property to provide funds for the continual commemoration of the testator's death and prayers for his soul's peace. Thus in 1492 Richard Clyff, late parson of S. George, London, bequeathed to the church of Holy Trinity, Coventry, a tenement in Well Street "to the entent . . . that the Wardeyns of the same Church, for the tyme beinge yerely, for evermore, observe and kepe within the same Church, in the vigyll of Saynt Alphege, placebo, and dirige over nyght, by ii well-dysposyd prestys, there to be said devoutly without note; and on the morowe after, ayther of the same prestys to say messe of Requiem for the soules of John Cliff, and Margarete hys wyff, hys ffader and moder, hys own Soule, all hys ffrendys Saulys, and all Crystyan Saulys." Other features of the obit were the distribution of alms to the poor, and the feast which followed the service. Thus on the day whereon Robert Burnell's obit was kept 4s. was given to the poor, and 3s. 10d. expended in bread and ale.¹

When a craftsman died, the whole company of his brethren were present at his burial, which, if he were a noteworthy citizen, would take place with much solemnity at the Greyfriars' or one of the parish churches.² Funeral masses were invariably said in the cathedral, the offerings remaining to the use of S. Mary's minster and convent; the candles also that had burnt

¹ Sharp, *Antiq.*, 92.

² The drapers, mercers, dyers, cardmakers, and saddlers (later the cappers), smiths, and girdlers had chapels in S. Michael's church; the butchers, dyers, and tanners in Trinity. The fullers held the chapel of S. George on the Gosford Gate. Some of the inferior crafts, viz. the pinner, tilers, and coopers, had their annual mass and drinking at Whitefriars.

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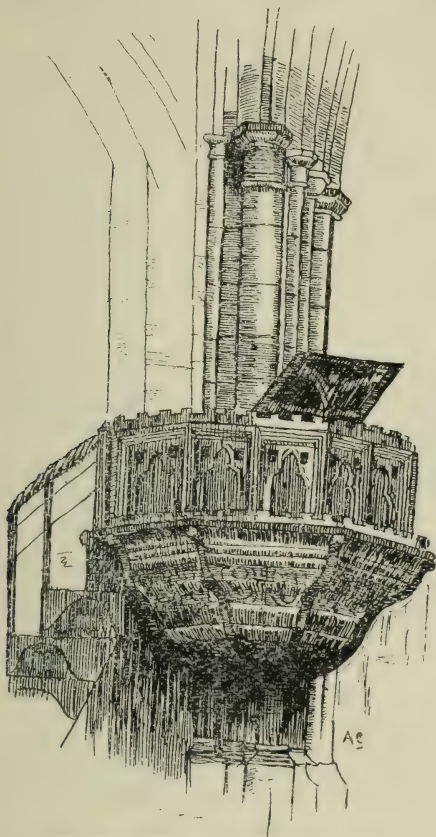
about the coffins¹ were left in the cathedral after the dead had been borne away to their graves. Whether the people of Coventry disliked this practice we cannot tell, but it brought the convent into collision with the Greyfriars, who, as an active and popular body within the town, were rather disposed to call the authority of the monks in question. The matter of the funeral candles and offerings touched the former very nearly, for their chapel was a favourite burial place; and in 1446 Friar John Bredon threw down his glove. We would fain know if brother John were a mere busybody or a born reformer; perhaps he belongs rather to the latter than the former class, as he also appears, it seems, as a champion of the poorer folk against the deceiving victuallers.² Be this as it may, he was a man of great influence with the citizens, and, together with the prior, had helped on a former occasion to still the religious excitement which had followed on the preaching of Grace, the hermit. The enmity between the friars and the convent was at last the cause of his overthrow. Concerning this matter of the candles, the friar was so moved to bitterness that he openly preached and affirmed "in the parish churches of this same citee . . . that alle maner offerynges owen to be yeven alonely to theyme that mynistren the Sacraments to the parisshe," and bade the people give these candles to the parish churches; "permytting my selfe," he says, "to defende theyme that so did." Moreover, the friar declared "that in Englonde was not so bonde a Citee as this Citee of Coventry is, in keping and observyng the said custome";

¹ This matter of the candles seems to have roused dissensions at an early date. In 1282 the corpse of a woman to be buried in the friars' cemetery at Dunstable was first conveyed to the priory church there for the funeral mass. The monks boasted that out of eight candles they only gave two to the Franciscans, keeping all the rest for themselves (*Cornh. Mag.*, vi. 835).

² The MS. annals note that in 1438 "Friar Bredon got the old strike again" (Harl. MS. 6388, f. 18).

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and in bills which he set up on the church doors he “promysed to delyver the pepull of this same Citee from the thraldom of Pharao.” The prior of S. Mary was not to be daunted by this audacious front, and petitioned



PULPIT, HOLY TRINITY CHURCH

the King against Friar Bredon. In due time sentence was pronounced, and a form of recantation arrived prescribed by parliament. In presence of the Forty-eight¹ the friar was compelled to admit that the custom he had inveighed against “is a custom commendable, and so

¹ *Leet Book*, 228.

The Story of Coventry

owyng to be kept and observed to encrease of mede, by pleasure made to Almighty God, who graunte to you and me to lif in this world aftir juste lawes and lawful customs vertuously, soo that we may deserve to rejoyse (enjoy) hevenly recompense everlastyngly.”¹ After which recantation he was banished the city.

The citizens were as thorough and systematic in their pastimes as in their prayers, and all sorts of amusements of a vigorous character, wherein they gladly indulged, were rarely discouraged by the corporation. The practice of archery was looked on as part of every man’s necessary training, and crafts were ordered to keep butts in good repair, so that all members of their fellowships could keep their hands well in use.² Bull-baiting, a favourite sport, gave its name to the Bull-ring hard by Trinity church; ³ but the traces of “le cokfytyng place” ⁴ and of the bowling-green near the Charterhouse ⁵ have been lost.

Bear-baiting was highly popular likewise, and frequent gifts to Sir Fulk Greville’s bearward ⁶ form a feature in the chamberlains’ accounts in the early days of Elizabeth. Like all the great Queen’s subjects the men of Coventry delighted in theatrical representations, and now that the local religious drama was dead, their

¹ Leland, *Collectanea*, v. 304; Sharp, *Antiq.*, 207.

² *Leet Book*, 338. The old archery ground is commemorated in “the Butts,” now a street, but once outside the walls. A “butt” is properly a mound on which the target is set up. In Edward IV.’s reign butts were ordered to be made in every township, and the inhabitants were to shoot on all feast days under pain of $\frac{1}{2}$ d. at every omission (Strutt, *Sports and Pastimes*, 57).

³ Chamberlains to make a ring for the “baiting of bulls as heretofore” (*Leet Book*, 83).

⁴ No one to shoot arrows in “le cokfytyng place” (*ib.*, 196).

⁵ *Ib.*, 656.

⁶ *Chamberlains’ and Wardens’ Accounts* (Corp. MS. A. 7b, f. 2). “Paid to Sir fhoulke Grevile Bearewarde iiis. iiiid”

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appreciation of the strolling players' art caused constant inroads to be made on the public purse. The wardens were frequently called upon for payments, such as "to the Earle of Darbyes players vs.," "to the lord Chamberlain's players xs.,"¹ items which accord ill with the payments for sermons at this time.² In the end the sermons gained the day, and it would be hard to find in the Midlands—save Banbury—a more staunchly Puritan town than Coventry under the Stuarts.

In the sixteenth century the corporation appear to have become disquieted at the reckless lives and illicit amusements of those over whom they ruled. A new era was about to dawn, wherein mediæval barriers would be broken down; and it seems as if the discreet and worthy burghers were afraid of the lawlessness and unrest which had entered into the spirit of society, and which in itself was the sign of coming change. Orders directed against gaming,³ or intercourse, especially on the part of apprentices, with women of evil fame had always been a feature of the regulations passed by the leet; but as time goes on the mention of "unlawful games" becomes more and more frequent. As early as 1510 the aldermen of the several wards were charged to make search "for all them that keep misrule," who on being discovered were to be committed to ward, or, if they persisted in their evil ways, to be banished the city.⁴ In 1516 this command was followed up by a fresh ordinance enjoining them to make inquiry for vagabonds, "as well women as men," suspected alehouses, "blynde ynnes," unlawful games, and the like.⁵ But the evil appeared to increase as the century advanced,

¹ Corp. MS. A. 7b, ff. 2, 8.

² "Paid for 3 sermons of Mr Butler's and ringing to them 35s. 3d." (*ib.*, f. 1).

³ *Leet Book*, 271.

⁴ *Ib.*, 629.

⁵ *Ib.*, 652. "Blind inns" were secret taverns, where, of course, all sorts of irregular proceedings went on.

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and in 1548 a complaint of leet reveals a state of things which has quite a modern look, so little change has human nature and human habit undergone these three hundred and fifty years. Many, we learn, passed their time drinking in taverns, and “playnge at the cardes and tables,¹ and spende all that they can gett prodigally upon theym selves to the highe displeasure of God and theyre owne ympovershyng, whereas,” the worthy men of the leet were of opinion, “if it were spent at home in theyre owne houses theyre wiffes and childerne shulde have part therof.”² It was forthwith decreed that any of these prodigals, whether “labourer, journeyman, or apprentice,” if discovered resorting to any alehouse on a work day should be imprisoned for a day and night.

In those days, as in our own time, the lower classes had the keenest appreciation of all that appertained to sport, and the loafer loved to roam the country lanes with a dog at his heels. Long time since the prior had complained how the citizens hunted and hawked in his warren, and in the sixteenth century the corporation were hard put to it to keep this passion within the bounds prescribed by the statutes of the realm. People, we hear in the eighteenth year of Henry VIII., who did not possess the necessary qualification, a 40s. freehold, presumed to keep birds and dogs, whereby idleness “is greatly encreased”; henceforward they were forbidden to keep hawk, hound, greyhound, or ferret, or to presume to hunt with the same under a heavy penalty.³

Other practices in which the citizens indulged were looked upon with an unfavourable eye by the rulers of the town, brawling being expressly forbidden. No one was allowed to carry defensive weapons through the streets, and hosts were charged to bid their stranger guests leave their swords behind them, when they had occasion to leave the hostels wherein they had taken

¹ *i.e.* Draughts.

² *Leet Book*, 786.

³ *Ib.*, 690.

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lodging.¹ The penalty for smiting "with a knife drawyn" was half a mark, unless the smiter were "himself defendant." "No man of craft," another order runs, "bear no bills, nor gysarnes, nor great staves," upon pain of forfeiture of the same weapons. Those who were driving cattle to market could, however, carry a small staff in their hands.² These orders did not suffice by any means to abolish brawls, and sometimes lords, knights and squires, the "mighty" men of the country round, fought out their ancient family quarrels among the dwellings of the burgher folk;³ at others the citizens had their own grievances to urge against one or other of these mighty men, and drew sword upon him and his retainers. In these cases there would be, most likely, death or shedding of blood, while in disputes arising among the citizens themselves merely blows and beatings would be given on either side, but with such violence that combatants were afterwards often spoken of as "in despair of their lives" from the injuries they had received.

Troubles of this kind were a feature of the times when the gentry flocked into the city to see the far-famed Corpus Christi shows, or to be near the Court, for Henry VI. and his Queen tarried frequently at Coventry. On Corpus Christi even in the year 1448 Sir Humphrey Stafford and his son Richard were attacked in the Broadgate⁴ after nightfall, as they came from Lady Shrewsbury's⁵ lodging, by Sir Robert Harcourt and his men. Richard was slain and his father wounded in the darkness and confusion, while two of the Harcourt faction died also in the fray. All this took place, says John Northwood, writing to Viscount Beaumont, "as men say, in a Paternoster while." It was a terrible business; Northwood, evidently striving to be exact, could hardly

¹ *Leet Book*, 28.

² *Ib.*, 28.

³ See below, the Harcourt and Stafford quarrel.

⁴ Sharp, *Mysteries*, 169.

⁵ Wife of the famous Talbot.

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describe how it happened. The two chief enemies, he says, "fell in handes togyder, and Sir Robert smot hym (Sir Humphrey) a grette stroke on the hed with hys sord, and Richard with hys dagger hastily went toward hym, and as he stombled on of Harcourts men smot hym in the bak with a knyfe, men wotte not ho hytt was reddely ; hys fader hard noys and rode toward hem and hys men ronne before hym thyderward, and in the goyng downe of hys hors, on, he wotte not ho,¹ be hynd hym smot hym on the hede with a nege tole,² men know not with us with what wepone, that he fell downe and hys son fell downe be fore hym as goode as dede." And the whole affray—characteristically enough—was "be cawse of an old debate that was betwene heme for takyng of a dystres as hyt is told." The law was not always prompt in bringing gentlefolk to account, and Sir Robert Harcourt at that time escaped justice, only to be overtaken by revenge, however, twenty-two years later, when he died at the hands of the Staffords.³

Among the citizens also certain feasts and merry-makings ministered occasion for riots and quarrels. Such were the Lammas feasts, whereon the chamberlains, with a tumultuous following, opened out the common pasture lands that encircled the city. Such again were the three great processional nights, the vigils of Corpus Christi, of S. John the Baptist (Midsummer eve) and S. Peter. "The people come at Lammas," runs an order of Leet, "in excess number and unruly, to ill ensample "; and it was laid down that only a few from each ward, who had been appointed by the corporation, should accompany the chamberlains on their annual ride. Moreover, "great debate and manslaughter and other perils and sins" fell out on Midsummer eve and S. Peter's night, because so "great a multitude" was gathered together at that season within the city, "that

¹ *i.e.* Who.

² *i.e.* Edge tool.

³ *Paston Letters*, i. 73.

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it lieth in no man's power . . . for to please them all";¹ and the Church tried to interfere in the interests of peace, but without success. Occasionally the good folk of the place fell to blows, it would seem, on ordinary working days, without having their presence at a merry-making to urge in extenuation of their fault. Thus in 1444 the corvesars, or tanners of leather, fell out about some obscure point or other with the weavers, and so hotly did the quarrel rage between them, and so frequent the exchange of deadly blows, that Thomas Burdeux, weaver, was said to be in "despair of his life" by reason of the sore beating he had received. The quarrel was allayed, according to the wisdom of the mayor and his discreet council, by the drinking of a certain amount of ale among the fellowship of both crafts at their joint expense.²

But few pleasures appealed to the mediæval citizen so strongly as that of dining well; and besides these peace-promoting drinkings there were many occasions whereon members of guilds and crafts met together to feast and do their best to justify the reputation, which still clings to city folk and aldermen, of loving good cheer. The meals of the Middle Ages were long and heavy. The highly-flavoured cookery, with its strange mixture of meat and sweets—fowls stuffed with currants was a favourite dish—would appear barbarous to modern epicures; but such as it was, vast preparations and much money were lavished upon it. The members of each craft fellowship met once a year to hold a feast, while the brethren of the Trinity guild celebrated the Assumption and S. Peter's Eve by a banquet and probably also the festival of the Decollation of S. John. The Corpus Christi had a "Lenton" dinner, a "goose" dinner in August, and a "venison" one in October,³

¹ Sharp, *Mysteries*, 180.

² *Leet Book*, 204.

³ Corp. MS. A. 6. *Corpus Christi Guild Accounts*, ff. 54, 56, 80.

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and in 1492 they spent £26, os. 4d. on their feasts, a sum only 13s. less than the annual stipend due to the five priests supported by the guild.¹ But the record of common feasting is not yet exhausted. The members of the Corpus Christi fraternity met together at a breakfast on the morning of the festival of the Body of Christ, and all the crafts supped on cakes and ale on the great processional nights. One dozen spiced cakes, three dozen white cakes, “a seysterne” and a half of ale with “comfets,” and a pound of “marmalet” were ordered for the carpenters’ merry-making on Midsummer eve, 1534.² Nor were the journeymen forgotten on these joyous evenings; they partook of plainer fare—bread and ale—at their master’s expense.

On Midsummer and S. Peter’s eves the townsfolk gave themselves up to mirth and jollity, decorating banqueting-halls, streets, and houses with birchen boughs and all manner of greenery.³ This custom was, Stowe tells us, also observed in London, where every man’s door was “shadowed with Greene Birch, long Fennel, S. John’s wort, Orpin, white Lilies, and such like, garnished with Garlands of beautifull flowers, and had also Lamps of glasse with Oyle burning in them all the night.”⁴ But lamps were not the only means of illumination on those joyous nights. “On the Vigils of Festivall dayes and on the same Festivall dayes in the Evenings,” continues the London chronicler, “after the Sun-setting, there were usually made Bone-fires in the streets, every man bestowing wood or labour towards them. The wealthier sort also before their doores, neere to the said Bone-fires, would set out Tables on

¹ Corp. MS. A. 6. *Corpus Christi Guild Accounts*, f. 43.

² The smiths spent money recklessly at this season until 1472, when it was ordained that the master of the craft should be allowed 5s. on Midsummer, and 3s. 6d. on S. Peter’s eve, “and not a penny more,” wherewith to provide supper (Sharp, *Mysteries*, 183).

³ *Ib.*, 179.

⁴ *Ib.*, 176.

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the vigils, furnished with sweete bread and good drinke, and on the Festivall days with meats and drinckes plentifully, whereunto they would invite their neighbours and passengers also to sit, and be merry with them in great familiarity, praying God for his benefits bestowed on them. These were called Bone-fires, as well of amity amongst neighbours, that being before at controversie, were there by the labour of others reconciled, and made of bitter enemies loving friends.”¹

It is good to dwell on this scene of frank gaiety and open-handed hospitality, the pleasantest, to my thinking, that has come to us from mediæval times. The dusk lighted by the flicker of the bonfires, the flower-wreathed houses, the merry groups, the hand-clasp in token of reconciliation, what a picturesque glimpse we have here of common union and common joy to which our fêtes and holidays nowadays can afford no parallel!

But the chief glory of these festal nights was the setting forth of the armed watch.² This was not such an imposing spectacle in Coventry as in London, where the route extended, says Stowe, “to 3200 Taylors yards of assize.” The procession way was lighted by 700 cressets, and the marching watch numbered 2000 men. Yet the Coventry folk made great preparation for their humbler show, which was undertaken, so said the drapers’ craft with pardonable pride, “to the lawde and prayse of God and the worship of this city.” All the craft fellowships met together to consult as to ways and means some days beforehand, “at the mayor’s commandment,” and dire penalties were laid on those who should refuse to attend on Midsummer night when the chief master sent his “clerk or sumoner” to warn

¹ See quotation from Stowe in Sharp, *Mysteries*, 175.

² This was a universal custom, but there were special local feasts. For instance, at Canterbury, on the eve of the Translation of S. Thomas, a watch was kept. At Chester, Shrove Tuesday was a day for general merrymaking (Green, i. 149).

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them.¹ When all was ready for the procession, the worthy folk rode forth, two by two, each man in the livery proper to his calling, the least important brotherhood going first, the others following, each in their degree, until the train of fellowships closed with the mercers, the senior craft.² The journeymen, perhaps on foot, followed their masters, and the chief folk of the corporation rode conspicuous in their scarlet cloaks, each one having an attendant torchbearer.³ But the chief glory of the procession was the sight of the watch riding in shining armour, and bearing battle-axes, swords and guns. Thus the dyers sent forth two clad in complete white armour, and four in brigandines, the drapers four "in almayne revetts," while the smiths among others hired four, and the butchers made provision for six armed men.⁴ Moreover, a crowd of minstrels and hirelings bearing cressets, torches, spears gay with pennons and bells,⁵ streamers whereon were depicted the arms of the various crafts,⁶ and mirth-provoking figures of giants and giantesses,⁷ caused the streets to fill with colour, light, music, and laughter. The citizens in the dusk of those June evenings beheld a right gallant show. There was the sound of minstrelsy, broken by a sudden discharge of guns,⁸ with the murmur of many voices and the tramp of many feet, and between the rows of densely packed crowd the torchlights glinted on the bright advancing line of the armed watch, or glowed on the

¹ Among the dyers, the penalty was 13s. 4d (Sharp, *op. cit.*, 183).

² *Ib.*, 160.

³ *Ib.*, 184.

⁴ *Ib.*, 193-4.

⁵ *Ib.*, 194.

⁶ *Ib.*, 196.

⁷ The cappers paid 9d. for canvas to make a new skirt for the giant, and "for mendyng of hys head and arme, xvid." (*ib.*, 201). The dyers also furnished a pageant wherein a hart and a herdsman blowing a horn figured. Perhaps this was a cause why they had been so long allowed to escape from providing a pageant on Corpus Christi day. See above, p. 220.

⁸ Sharp, 193. Drapers' Accounts, 1555, "payd to xviiij gonnarys lxiijs. iiij*d.* ; payd for xij^l of gonepother, xijs. vjd."

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stately figures of my masters the mayor, sheriffs and aldermen, arrayed in scarlet, bringing up may-be the rear of the train. In this manner did the good folk of Coventry celebrate the vigils of S. John the Baptist and S. Peter, according to the ancient custom of the city, until the changes of the sixteenth century, or the growth of Puritan feeling, or poverty, or a combination of all these, caused the observance to be laid aside. The riding on S. Peter's eve was discontinued after 1549,¹ though Midsummer eve was still celebrated by a procession for some years after that date.

On the morning of the Corpus Christi festival, before the Mystery Plays were acted, another procession of the crafts, more strictly religious in character than those we have described, also took place. Following the train of companies of traders and artificers came the members or priests of the Trinity guild bearing the Host, the various religious bodies of the city probably walking behind the Sacrament. The Corpus Christi guild provided gorgeous vessels, wherein the consecrated elements were placed, and four burgesses hired by the fraternity carried a canopy of costly material over the same, while the effect of the religious ceremonial was heightened by banner and crucifix coming from the treasuries of the guilds. A pageant setting forth scenes in the life of the Virgin, the Annunciation, which, on account of its mystical meaning, was highly appropriate to the occasion, and the Assumption also figured in the train, and the records of the Corpus Christi guild show the payments made to the persons who represented S. Gabriel bearing the lily,² the Virgin with a crown of great price upon her head, the twelve apostles, including S. Thomas of India, eight virgins, S. Margaret and S. Catherine. And the smiths caused the actor who was to represent Herod in their pageant to ride on horseback in a

¹ Sharp, *Mysteries*, 184.

² "To gabriell for beryng the lilly iiijd." (*ib.*, 162).

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gorgeously painted coat in the procession. After this portion of the festival was over, the craftsfolk set forth the famous plays or pageants, whereof the fame filled Coventry from time to time with royal and noble visitors, and all the good folk of the surrounding country. Henry V. in 1416, Margaret of Anjou in 1457, Richard III. in 1485, Henry VII. in 1487, and again with his Queen, Elizabeth of York, in 1493,¹ witnessed these shows, which in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries were at the height of their popularity.

Among the everyday people who came at this season in crowds to Coventry, merchants combined business with religious edification, since the fair followed hard on the plays,² with others the latter counted most. "If you believe not me," says a preacher in the *Hundred Merry Tales*, at the conclusion of his sermon on the Creed, "then for a more surety and sufficient authority, go your way to Coventry and there ye shall see them all played in Corpus Christi play."³ We may take it that the dramatic illusion was notably sustained in these plays, and that they "fortified the unlearned in their faith." The men of this midland city had a passion for acting; they performed on every occasion; such adepts were they at their art that we hear of their playing at Court in 1530, at Bristol and Abingdon in 1570, and four times in Leicester between 1564 and 1571-2.⁴ In this manner did Warwickshire folk prepare for Shakespeare's coming. The soil on which the Elizabethan drama

¹ The frequent mistakes in chronology made by all writers who depend on Sharp or the printed versions of the Annals for dates of these visits make it important to insist on them.

² The Shrewsbury mercers' guild imposed a fine on such of its members who missed the local procession through absence at Coventry fair. Chambers, *Medieval Stage*, ii. 110.

³ C. Mery Talys, lvi. (quoted Chambers, ii. 358).

⁴ Chambers, *op. cit.*, ii. 362. Bateson, *Leicester*, III. 111, 120, 127, 137.

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grew with such luxuriance, had been tilled for well-nigh two hundred years by nameless actors, who set forth on local stages the tragedy, which for simple dignity, has no peer among the tragedies of the world.

The famous Corpus Christi pageants were not of lay but of clerical origin. The church was the earliest theatre; clerks the first actors; and the earliest plays grew out of the dramatic rendering of parts of the Easter and Christmas services—a colloquy between those representing the angel at the sepulchre and the women bearing precious ointment,¹ or the singing by a choir-boy “in the similitude of an angel” perched “in excelso”—aloft—of glad tidings to personators of the shepherds of Bethlehem,² or the successive utterance of clerks in the character of Isaiah, Habakkuk and other prophets of appropriate testimony to the coming of Christ. From such simple, liturgical sources there developed first in clerical, then in lay, hands, a religious drama which ultimately covered the whole field of Christian history from the Creation to the Day of Doom. In view of the near connection between the Coventry monks and the Lichfield canons, it is of great interest to note that the *Peregrini*—the appearance of Christ to the travellers at Emmaus—an early development of the Easter cycle, and the *Pastores*, or the Christmas Shepherds’ play, were regularly performed at Lichfield under Bishop Hugh of Nonant.³ Of other plays, called *Miracula* or Miracles, whereof the source was not the liturgy, but rather the life of a saint, there is frequent mention; such an one in honour of S.

¹ For this and the singing of the *Quem quæritis*, “whom seek ye?” we have a “stage direction” in the *Regularis Concordia* of S. Ethelwold as early as Edgar’s reign (959-79). See Chambers, ii. App. O.

² *Ib.*, ii. 41.

³ Bishop, 1188-1198. See Chambers, *op. cit.*, ii. 36. Cf. the matter of the “castel of Emaus” in the cappers’ play at Coventry, Sharp, 48.

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Catherine was performed before 1119 at a monastic school at Dunstable on the road between London and Coventry. Nearly 400 years later a "miracle" on the same subject was seen in the "Little Park" just outside the walls of the midland city.

As the liturgical plays grew long and elaborate they ceased to be included in the church service; and gradually it came about that the churchyard, since it would admit of more spectators than the church, was deemed a more fitting place for their representation, as at Beverley, where about 1220 a crowd assembled to witness a play on the Resurrection.¹ Thence, so greatly did the laity love these shows, they passed to convenient greens and highways, somewhat to the scandal of rigid moralists, who held that, though clerks might act in church plays, it was a "sight of sin" for them to hold these performances in a more secular neighbourhood. It was probably in response to this feeling that the regular clergy—save on occasions the friars—gradually withdrew from out door plays, and that lay performers, controlled by the growing and wealthy craft-guilds, practically replaced clerks. The vulgar tongue ousted Latin, and plays proper to Easter and Christmas, linked together into one whole religious story, were acted on the great processional feasts, when daylight is longest, Corpus Christi or, less frequently, Whitsuntide. The process, still somewhat obscure to us, whereby the performances passed under secular control, would seem to be complete in the fourteenth century. Local tradition places the earliest representation at Chester in 1328, while we have more certain knowledge of them at Beverley in 1377, York in 1378 and Coventry in 1392. What part, if any, was played by the professional entertainers, wandering "mimes," minstrels and jugglers in the gradual secularization of the plays we know not, neither is there definite information about the earliest dramatic authors, save that

¹ *Furnivall misc.*, 206-7.

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tradition points to Ralph Higden of *Polychronicon* fame as author of the Chester cycle. Plays, however, were so frequently revised and expanded by local folks, clerks and laymen, that they sometimes became, like the Coventry craft-plays, affairs of metrical patchwork. The last redaction these special dramas underwent was at the



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hands of Robert Croo, a jack-of-all-trades theatrical, by whom they were “neuly translate” or “neuly correcte” in 1535.¹

¹ See Hardin Craig, *Two Coventry Corpus Christi Plays*, Early English Text Society, to which I am much indebted. The older work on this subject is Sharp’s *Dissertation on the Dramatic Mysteries*. Chambers’ *Medieval Stage* is very rich in Coventry material.

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Each Coventry craft was required by the authorities to contribute towards the setting forth of a pageant at the festival. The more important fraternities—such as the mercers and drapers—were able to bear the expenses of furnishing stage scenery, paying actors, and providing suitable accessories without any aid from bodies outside their ranks. But among the lesser crafts it was usual for two, three, four, or more to band together in order to lessen the individual burden,¹ while in all cases the journeymen probably contributed towards the expenses of their masters' pageant.² The task of adjusting these payments according to the means of the various inferior craft companies, was a delicate one, and often brought trouble upon the corporation. None of them cared to undertake the expenses and responsibility involved in the provision of a play. The smiths in 1428 petitioned the leet to be released from the burden;³ the dyers in 1494 could not be induced to take the load upon their shoulders;⁴ while for many years the skinnners, fishmongers, cappers, corvesars, butchers, and others contrived to evade payment towards the support of a pageant, until a complaint arose from some of the contributory crafts that they were over-burdened with charges consequent thereon.

This primary difficulty being overcome, the crafts took no little pains to make the representations as perfect as possible. They provided the dresses and stage furniture from their own funds, each company having a pageant-

¹ See *Leet Book*, 205, for the case of the cardmakers, saddlers, painters and masons.

² *Ib.*, 94. The case of the weavers' journeymen, who paid 4d. a piece, is the only one on record.

³ Sharp, 8.

⁴ *Ib.*, 9, 10. There is no record that the dyers ever contributed to the Mystery Plays. In 1539 the Mayor of Coventry told Cromwell that the poor commons were at such expense with their plays and pageants that they fared the worse all the year after. Chambers, *op. cit.*, ii. 358.

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house¹ usually in Mill Lane, now Cox Street, wherein these properties were stored. They paid the composer of the piece, if need were, or the copyist; the actors also, who were may-be lower craftsfolk, had a fixed hire, with "bread and ale" at rehearsals, and between the repetition of the performance on the festival day in different quarters of the town. All were required by order of leet to play "well and sufficiently," "lest any impediment should arise" in the performance, under pain of 20s. to the town wall,² and in order that they might be perfect in their several parts, there were usually two, or in the case of a new play no less than five, rehearsals before the festival,³ some of these taking place in the presence of the assembled fellowship, while the "keeper of the play book" attended, no doubt in the capacity of prompter.

The common word for these craft-plays is pageants, a word of uncertain origin, which is also applied to the vehicle or movable stage whereon the acting took place. These pageants⁴ were divided into two parts;

¹ Mr Chambers' surmise that the common lands were enclosed to build pageant-houses on is untenable. The rents derived from the enclosed lands was devoted to the upkeep of the pageants.

² Sharp, *op. cit.*, 9.

³ *Ib.*, 20.

⁴ See illustrations in *Furnivall Misc.* taken from MS. Bodl. 264 ff. 54b, 76a. These pageants do indeed look like a glorified Punch and Judy show, as Mr Chambers has said.



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the actors dressed—and no doubt waited also, when their presence was not required on the stage—in the under part, where they were concealed by hanging cloths; the play was set forth on the upper part, which was open to the view, and furnished with suitable scenery, and the floor strewn with rushes. Journeymen and other hirelings dragged the pageants from place to place, the play being repeated at convenient points within the city, beginning with Gosford Street. The second and third stations appear to have been at the end of Much Park Street,



most likely the corner of Jordan Well, and at the New Gate respectively. Dr Craig thinks that there were ten stations, which would accord well with the number of pageants and of wards within the city, though I cannot think that each of the plays was performed ten times over. Flesh is weak, and it is difficult to see how either actors or spectators could have borne the strain.¹ More-

¹ It is difficult to say what they may not have endured. At Skinnerswell in 1411, a play lasted for seven days! There were twelve to sixteen stations at York; but the York plays were far shorter than the Coventry ones.

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over even the long light days of May or June would hardly have sufficed for such a stupendous task: when it was once essayed, all the pageants being first played before Richard Wood's door to pleasure Queen Margaret, in 1457, daylight failed, and the performance of "Doomsday" was perforce abandoned. Indeed it seems that this particular play, which naturally concluded the series, was but thrice acted, since the drapers



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regularly order three "worldys"—for which in 1556 they paid Croo two shillings—one to be destroyed, it appears, in each performance.¹

No doubt this mobility of the theatre, and the simultaneous acting of various pageants at different stations was necessitated by the lack of an open space within the city sufficient to contain the throng of spectators. The acting of single plays, not belonging to the

¹ Sharp, *op. cit.*, 73.

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traditional cycle, such as the play of S. Catherine acted in 1491, or that of S. Crytyan or Christian, “*magnus ludus vocatus seynt Xpeans pley*,”¹ performed at Whitsuntide in 1505, took place in the Little Park where space was ample. That a regular open-air amphitheatre was constructed—such as the *plân an guare* which survives at S. Just in Cornwall, is improbable; the Park-Hollows, where later Lollard and Marian martyrs suffered death, would may-be serve aptly for the purpose. Such an indelible impression did S. Christian’s play make on those that beheld it, that years later when divers neighbours and friends were asked to give proof of Walter Smith’s age—it was the Walter Smith who was after strangled by means of Dorothy, his faithless wife—they recalled that his baptism took place the year S. Christian’s play was played in the Little Park.

There was possibly a convenient station close to the Greyfriars’ church, where Henry VII. and his Queen viewed the plays in 1493. This is the explanation, whereat Dr Craig² has arrived after a careful sifting of the evidence, of the cryptic saying of some of the annalists that the King and Queen saw the plays acted *by the Greyfriars*. “In his Mayoralty,” says one version, “K. H. 7 came to see the plays acted by the *Grey Friers* and much commended them”; another version, quoted by Dr Craig, varies the reading to “*at the greyfriars*,”

¹ By the kindness of the editor of the *Victoria County History*, I am permitted to include this note from an unprinted MS., Inq. p.m. 19 H. 8, 46-45 (P.R.O.) proof of age of Walter Smith of Coventry. It is important as furnishing proof that S. Christian is the right reading instead of S. Catherine, which Dr Craig would substitute. For S. Christianus, bishop of Auxerre in the ninth century, and S. Christiana, virgin, of Jermunde in Flanders, who flourished in the eighth century, see Smith and Wall, *Dict. Chr. Biog.* Miss Toulmin Smith, thinks that S. Christina and S. Christiana were distinct persons. There was a play in honour of the former at Bethersden in Kent. *York Plays*, lxxv.

² Craig, *op. cit.* xxi.-ii.

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the probably correct interpretation.¹ The only other reference to the grey friars' acting comes from Dugdale, who goes further in attributing a particular manuscript to this particular house. The plays were "acted," he says, "with mighty state and reverence by the Friers of this House"; and further "I have been told," he continues, "by some old people, who in their younger years were eye-witnesses of these *Pageants* so acted, that the yearly confluence of people to see that shew was extraordinary great, and yeilded no small advantage to this City."² Here Homer distinctly nods. Dugdale does not seem to have heard of the craft plays, whereof the regular representation did not cease until 1580,³ twenty-five years before his birth, and thirty-five years before his entry into Coventry grammar school, but it was clearly to these pageants that the old people aforesaid referred, since any hypothetical acting on the part of the friars must have ceased in 1538 with the suppression of their house, sixty-seven years before Dugdale's birth and seventy-seven years before the beginning of his scholastic life at Coventry.

It is also on the slenderest grounds that the historian of Warwickshire attributes the fifteenth century MS. of the *Ludus Coventriæ* to the Franciscans of that city. The first possessor of the manuscript was one Robert Hegge of Durham, after whose death in 1629 it appears to have passed into Cotton's possession and is still included in the great Cottonian collection in the British Museum.⁴ Cotton's librarian, Richard James, described the MS. on the fly-leaf as scenes from the New Testament,⁵ acted by monks or mendicant friars, adding that the book is commonly known as the Coventry plays

¹ See Chambers, ii., 419-20.

² Dugdale, *op. cit.*, i. 183.

³ They may have been performed as late as 1591.

⁴ Cott. Vesp. D., viii. ed. by Halliwell Phillips.

⁵ An error, since Old Testament scenes are also included.

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or Corpus Christi plays.¹ A later librarian in 1696 omitted the Coventry attribution, but still alluded to the plays as represented by mendicant friars.

Here the matter must rest. Probably the last word has still to be said on the subject. Scholars are not agreed on the *locale* of the *Ludus Coventriæ*, which have been assigned to districts as far removed as the north-east midlands and Wiltshire, or to their actors, who have been represented as strolling players, or even Coventry friars "on tour."² We might be disposed to accept—with caution—the view, evidently based on some tradition or other, that these plays were acted by friars,³ but the objection to identifying these friars with the Coventry Franciscans, acting at any rate in Coventry, is that the city was furnished already with well-authenticated craftsmen-acted plays of great renown, whereof some examples are now left, and that it would be impossible for two sets of plays and actors to command attention at the feast of Corpus Christi. Nor is there evidence, so far as I am aware, to connect any of the Coventry religious with the stationary plays acted on occasions at Whitsuntide.⁴

We touch surer ground when we come to examine the craft-plays, whereof we have abundance of evidence. Unlike those of Chester, York and Wakefield, the Coventry plays were few in number, having been fused together, and, it seems, formed a series illustrating the life of Christ, closing with His second coming on the Day of Judgment. The absence of Old Testament

¹ "Vulgo dicitur hic liber Ludus Coventriæ, sive ludus Corporis Christi."

² See Chambers, *op. cit.*, ii. 416-22; Gayley, *Plays of Our Forefathers*, 135-9, 325-7; Shelling, *Eliz. Drama*, 20-1; Leach in *Furnivall Misc.*, 232-3.

³ See *Camb. Lit. Hist.* v. 13 for the York friar, who described himself as a "professor of pageantry."

⁴ Mr Chambers suggests that, as the crafts admittedly altered and revised their plays, the *Ludus Coventriæ* may be a discarded version.

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scenes would be a rare feature, and the point has been disputed,¹ but so few of the pageants remain unidentified, and such striking scenes in the life of Christ have no play assigned to them, that there hardly seems room for scenes drawn from the Old Testament. The procession of prophets² — *Processus Prophetarum* — the nucleus whence the Old Testament cycle spread, is likewise very undeveloped in Coventry. None of the prophets are individualized in the plays that have come down to us, except Isaiah, who appears as prologue to the tailors' and sheremen's play of the *Nativity*; others appear as rather "defuce" commentators—to use their own word—further on in the action, and again as prologue to the weavers' play of the *Purification*.³ It is impossible to construct the whole series of the Coventry plays, for, save two pageants—that of the sheremen and tailors, and that of the weavers—all are missing, and in some cases the very titles of the plays cannot be recovered. The first pageant set forth was probably that of the guild of the Nativity, the company of tailors and sheremen, representing the *Annunciation, Joseph's Trouble, the Journey to Bethlehem, the Birth of Christ, the Angels and the Shepherds, the Offering of the Magi, the Flight into Egypt, and the Murder of the Innocents*. The weavers' pageant, wherein was set forth the *Presentation of Christ in the Temple, and Christ and the Doctors*, would follow as a matter of course. The titles of four pageants—those of the mercers, tanners, whittawers, and girdlers—are lost, though Dr Craig has made the shrewd guess that the subject of the first was the *Assumption*.⁴ The story of *Christ's Trial and Crucifixion* was the theme of the smiths' show, the *Burial* or the "taking down of

¹ Leach in *Furnivall Misc.*, 232.

² Craig, xviii.

³ On the *Prophetæ*, see Chambers, ii. 52, 70; Craig, xviii.

⁴ Craig, xvi. This certainly was the subject of a play; see payment to S. Thomas of India above, p. 287.

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God from the Cross" was played by the pinner and needlers, the *Harrowing of Hell* and the *Resurrection* was enacted on the stage furnished by the cardmakers, later cappers, and this, with the drapers' *Doomsday*, closes the list of the plays that are known to us. It will thus be seen that the inferior clothing crafts represented the Christmas cycle, and the workers in iron, smiths, pinner, cardmakers, the Passion-Resurrection one, so that we may suppose that the subject of the girdlers' pageant, since they were workers in iron, would be a subject nearly connected with this latter group—possibly the "Maundy" and *the Agony in the Garden*.

The shearmen and tailors' pageant of the *Nativity* and the weavers' *Presentation in the Temple*, both plays whereof the text has been preserved, were discovered by the antiquary, Thomas Sharp, and printed early in the last century, a fortunate circumstance, since the former with all Sharp's collection perished in the fire at Birmingham in 1879. One manuscript alone remains, now in the possession of the broad weavers and clothiers, a small volume of seventeen leaves, one missing, bound in ancient boards and leather, with end-papers of Holbeinesque wood-cuts. The whole—save two songs at the end—is in the handwriting of Robert Croo, by whom it was "newly translate" in 1534.

Both these plays are written in many metres, and obviously show the workmanship of many hands. Rhythm and versification often betray the 'prentice; indeed on the whole it is but clumsy writing; and yet here and there that wonderful instrument, the English language, gives out its music though it be stricken with an unsure and careless hand. Isaiah's prologue, the scenes between Simeon and Anna,¹—even the lines of that sublime braggart, Herod, have a hint of that wonderful quality to which English verse attained when Spenser

¹ Particularly in the fragment of—probably—an earlier version, see Craig, *op. cit.*, 119-122.

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wrote it. The kernel of the story is told in rough, simple quatrains; here and there—particularly in the comic parts—a rollicking stanza, derived apparently from one employed in the Chester cycle, breaks in; while some portions of the piece have been so worked over that the verse defies metrical analysis.¹

There is no comedy connected with the shepherds' scenes in the Coventry Christmas plays, such as occurs in the Towneley (Wakefield) cycle, where the sheep-stealing episode is the work of a master-hand. Nor is the presentation of their gifts to the Child as charming as the "bob of cherries" passage in the northern dramatist's verses, still the scene is full of the tender feeling, which it never fails to draw forth.

"I have nothing," says the first shepherd to Mary,—

"I haue nothyng to present *with thi* chylde
But my pype; hold, hold, take yt in thy hond;
Where-in moche pleyzure *that* I haue fond;
And now, to oonowre thy gloreose byrthe,
Thow schallt yt haue to make the myrthe.

II. PASTOR. Now, hayle be thow, chyld, *and* thy dame!

For in a pore loggyn here art thow leyde,
Soo the angell seyde *and* tolde vs thy name;
Holde, take thow here my hat on thy hedde!
And now off won thyng thow art well sped,
For weddur thow hast noo nede to complayne,
For wynd, ne sun, hayle, snoo and rayne.

III. PASTOR. Hayle be thou, Lorde ouer watur and landis!

For thy cunying all we ma make myrthe
Have here my myttens to pytt on thi hondis.
Other treysure have I non to present the with."

A pipe, a hat, a pair of mittens! How homely it sounds! In the *York Plays* the Child receives a broach with a tin bell, two cob-nuts on a string, and a horn spoon that can hold forty pease!²

¹ See Craig, *op. cit.*, xxiv.-v.

² Craig, *op. cit.*, 11-12. See also *York Plays*, 121-2.

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In the Nativity scene Joseph warms the Child at the breath of the beasts in the manger.

MARE. A! Josoff, husebond, my chyld waxith cold,
And we haue noo fyre to warme hym *with*.

JOSOFF. Now in my narmys I schall hym fold,
Kyng of all kyngis be fyld *and* be fryth;
He myght haue had bettur, *and* hym-selfe wold,
Then the brethyng of these bestis to warme hym *with*.

MARE. Now, Josoff, my husbond, fet heddur my chyld,
The Maker off man and hy Kyng of blys.

JOSOFF. That schalbe done anon, Mare soo myld,
For the brethyng of these bestis hath warmyd [hym] well,
i-wys.

The comic element in the preserved plays is represented by Joseph, a weariful old husband, and natural grumbler, who becomes exceedingly fretful when bidden by Mary to find some doves for the Purification offering at the Temple.

"Swette Josoff," says Mary, "fuffyll ye owre Lordis hestes."

"Why," says her husband ruefully,

"Why *and* woldist th[o]u haue me to hunt bridis nestis?
I pray the hartely, dame, leue thosse jestis
And talke of thatt wol be.

For, dame, woll I neuer vast my wyttis,
To wayte or pry where the wodkoce syttis;
Nor to jubbard among the merle pyttis,

For thatt wasse neyuer my gyse.
Now am I wold *and* ma not well goo:
A small twyge wold me ouerthroo;
And yche ¹ were wons lyggyd aloo,
Full yll then schulde I ryse."²

Finding the task inevitable, he murmurs that "the weakest go ever to the wall," and appeals for sympathy to the audience, particularly to the husbands of young

¹ Yche = I. And I were laid low. Jubbard = jeopard.

² Craig, 47.

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and headstrong wives in the traditional manner beloved by mediæval play-goers,

“How sey ye all this company
Thatt be weddid asse well asse I?
I wene that ye suffer moche woo;
For he that weddyth a yonge thyng
Must fullfyll all hir byddyng,
Or els make his handis wryng,
Or watur his iis when he wold syng;
And thatt all you do know.”¹

Finally he subsides helplessly upon a “lond” or furrow, till the angel appears and thrusts the birds into his hands. No mention is made to Mary of the miraculous interposition when Joseph has hurried home, pluming himself upon the capture.

“I am full glade I haue them fond.
Am nott I a good husbonde?”

says the saint with glee. It is a delicious scene, and its writer was a comedian of no mean order.

Herod was the popular favourite of the Christmas play cycle, for the predecessors of Shakespeare's groundlings loved to have their ears split by his noisy arrogance. He “ragis in the pagond and in the strete also,” according to a stage direction, and it is possible that his buffoonery was tinged with the memory of the wild frolic of the ancient Christmas festivals, the feast of the Ass and the feast of Fools.²

“It out-herods Herod,” says Shakespeare, the professional player, in scorn of the amateur of the old régime. But the rant Herod utters is gorgeous rant.

How the children shuddered when he wielded his “bright brond” or terrible sword, and how his great voice rang out through the streets when he cried:—

¹ Craig, 48.

² See on this point and on Balaam's ass, Chambers, *op. cit.*, ii. 57.

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“For I am evyn he thatt made bothe hevin and hell,
And of my myghte power holdith up this world rownd.
Magog and Madroke, bothe them did I confounde.”

What megalomania! “Magog and Madroke,” are undeniably fearsome names and suit well with Herod’s vizor, his falchion and towering crest.

“I am the cawse,” he cries out,—

“I am the cawse of this grett lyght and thunder;
Ytt ys throgh my fure *that* the¹ soche noyse dothe make.
My feyrefull contenance *the* clowdis so doth incumbur
That oftymis for drede *ther-*of the verre yerth doth quake.
Loke, when I *with* males this bryght brond doth schake,
All the whole world from the north to *the* sowthe
I ma them dystroie *with* won worde of my mowtlie!

Behold my contenance and my colur,
Bryghtur then the sun in the meddis of *the* dey.
Where can you haue a more grettur succur
Then to behold my *person* that ys soo gaye?
My fawcun *and* my fassion, *with* my gorgis araye,—
He thatt had the *grace* all-wey *ther-*on to thynke,
Lyve the¹ myght all-wey *with-*owt othur meyte or drynke.²

There was another Herod in the smiths’ play of the Passion, which has not survived, but he was outshone by Pilate, who received 4s. for his hire from the same company, whereas his fellow, the personator of Herod, received but 3s. 8d.; the former, too, drank wine in the intervals between the proformances, while the minor players were refreshed with mere ale for the nonce. Both these above named were rampant characters, Pilate always possessing the organ of Stentor. He appears again in the cappers’ play of the Resurrection, and evidently became very terrific, laying about him with his club or mall when the soldiers brought news that Christ had risen from the dead. Years after in 1790 when even the tradition of the pageants was almost

¹ *i.e.* they,

² Craig, 18.

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forgotten, Sharp, the antiquary, found Pilate's mall in an old chest in the cappers' chapel in S. Michael's church.¹ It was made of leather and stuffed with wool, and had evidently served as the head of a staff. Pilate's "balls," also made of leather, and possibly the fore-runners of the fool's bauble, also ministered occasion for noise and laughter. Both Herod, Pilate, and the demons had vizors or masks, hence the smiths' entry, "paid to Wattis for dressyng of the devells hede viiid." ² The devil—sometimes in the plural—appears in at least three Coventry plays, the *Trial*, where no doubt he whispered the dream to "Dame Procula," Pilate's wife, as he did at York,³ the *Harrowing of Hell, and Doomsday*. In the last two pageants there would be much by-play with Hell-mouth and the souls in the infernal place. I cannot tell in which particular piece the devil, whom John Heywood, interlude-writer, claimed as an "old acquaintance," was an actor, but it undoubtedly was in one of them, since in his *Four P.P.* Heywood says:—

" Oft in the play of Corpus Christi,
He had played the deuyll at Coventry."

Among the cappers' list of actors there is one which has about it a certain Miltonic grandeur; it is the "Mother of Death."⁴ It is to be regretted that *Doomsday* has not survived, for the names of the persons represented are very suggestive; two demons, two spirits were among them, two "worms of conscience," three black—or damned—souls, and three white—or saved—souls, and a Pharisee.⁵ The details of the stage property and payments abound in *naïf* and grotesque allusions. Thus we learn that a "new hook" for hanging Judas was purchased at the cost of 6d.;⁶ and one Fawston received 4d. for "coc croyng," presumably

¹ Sharp, 51.

² *Ib.*, 31.

³ York Plays, 277.

⁴ Sharp, 47.

⁵ *Ib.*, 66-7.

⁶ *Ib.*, 37.

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“to startle the penitent Peter.”¹ Adam’s spade,
“Eve’s dis’aff,” and the “apple tree,”²

“the fruit
Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste
Brought Death into the world and all our woe,”

are part of the stage furnishing of the *Harrowing of Hell*, since therein Christ drew out from limbo our first parents. Everything about these pageants must have been terrifying especially to sensitive or guilty consciences. A hireling was paid fourpence “for kepyng of fier at hell mothe”³ from the drapers. This craft also purchased a “baryll,” whereof the rolling might imitate the sound of the “yerthequake” on the Judgment Day.⁴

There is a good deal of information about the dresses of the actors in the pageants. Annas and Caiaphas wore “mitres,”⁵ Christ and Peter wigs of a gold colour.⁶ The tormentors who took part in the scourging had jackets of “blake bokeram” . . . with nayles and dysse (dice) upon them.⁷ It was the custom for actors to paint their faces.⁸ In *Doomsday* the “saved souls” were clothed in white leather, while those damned were made hideous by blackened faces, and—it seems—a parti-coloured dress of black and yellow, the yellow being so combined as to represent flame.⁹ It sounds crude but effective; and effective also, no doubt, was the blare of trumpets when the four angels of the judgment standing on their “pulpits” or raised platform called on the dead to appear before the judgment-seat.

No doubt the artist who painted the blackened and all but invisible fresco of the judgment day over the chancel arch of Trinity church, saw in his mind’s eye as he painted Christ seated on the rainbow, with saints and angels, lost and saved souls to His left and right, the rude

¹ Sharp, 36.

² Craig, 94, 97.

³ Sharp, 73.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ib.*, 55.

⁶ *Ib.*, 26.

⁷ *Ib.*, 33.

⁸ Craig, 90.

⁹ Sharp, 70, 71.

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and realistic representation enacted on the drapers' pageant at Corpus Christi-tide.

Another procession took place on S. George's day,¹ but there is no evidence that any play was acted on this occasion. S. George, however, had a legendary connection with Coventry; and he appears in two occasional pageants, the welcome to Prince Edward in 1474 and that to Prince Arthur in 1498; in the former case with elaborate stage setting, so that there may have been a play in his honour. Another dragon-slayer, S. Margaret, walked in the Corpus Christi procession,² and it is possible she may have had a part in the play, as also the other six champions of Christendom, who greeted Queen Margaret in 1457, but here all is conjecture. S. George's long dramatic life in the Mummers' Christmas play in Warwickshire has, of course, only ceased in our time.

Other occasional pageants, noted in the annals, afford us glimpses of tantalising brevity of dramatic shows and gorgeous preparations for the reception of royalty. Thirteen years after Arthur's visit, the prince's brother, King Henry VIII., and Queen Catharine, who must have entered on the eastern side of the city, found at Jordon Well three pageants, embellished with the "nine orders of angels," to greet them. There were others, with "divers beautiful damsels," and "goodly stage play" upon them, but we have no record of the verses composed in the King's honour.¹ While the mercers' pageant stood gallantly trimmed at the Cross Cheaping in 1526 to welcome the Princess Mary. This was before the divorce question had become the talk of Europe,

¹ *Leet Book*, 589.

² Sharp, 166. For the riding of the George at Norwich, Leicester, Stratford, and elsewhere, *v.* Chambers, i. 221-3. Plays in honour of S. George were performed at Lydd, New Romney, Basingbourne (*ib.*, ii. 132).

¹ Harl. MS. 6388, f. 26 *dorso*.

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and the daughter of Catherine of Arragon was still held in high honour ; so that the citizens made great preparations for her coming, even taking down the heads and quarters of traitors from the gates lest they should annoy the lady's sight.¹

Fifty years later another sovereign witnessed a memorable performance of the Coventry men. On Hox Tuesday—the Tuesday after the second Sunday after Easter—certain folk-games were held to commemorate, so the historians of the sixteenth century declared, the defeat of the Danes in the eleventh.² These games, “invented”—so say the annals—in 1416, fell into disuse soon after the Reformation, but were revived on the occasion of Elizabeth's visit to Kenilworth in 1575. At that time certain “good harted men of Couentree,” led on by Captain Cox, alecunner and mason, presented the “olld storiall sheaw” before the Queen, “whereat,” Laneham tells us in his delightful letter, quoted in Gascoigne's *Princely Pleasures of Kenilworth Castle*, “her Maiestie laught well,” while the players “wear the iocunder . . . becauz her highnes had giuen them too buckes and fiae marke in mony to make mery togyther.” The play consisted in a sham fight between the English and the Danish “launsknights,” but whether accompanied by folk-rymes or no we cannot tell. “Eeuen at the first entree,” says Laneham, who greatly enjoyed the fun, “the meeting waxt sumwhat warm. . . . A valiant captain of great prowes az fiers az a fox assauting a gooz, waz so hardy to give the first stroke : then get they grisly togyther : that great waz the activitee that day too be seen thear a both sidez : ton³ very eager for purchaz of pray, toother⁴ utterly

¹ Sharp, *op. cit.*, 158.

² Rous (*Hist. Regum Angliæ*, 105-6) ascribes it to the rejoicings on the death of Hardicanute. On Hock-tide, see Chambers, i. 154-5.

³ The one.

⁴ The other.

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stoout for redemption of libertie : thus, quarrell enflamed fury a both sidez. 'Twise the Danes had y^e better, but at the last conflict, beaten down, ouercom, and many led captiue for triumph by our English weemen." The last detail was no doubt well liked by her majesty, who was certainly proving that she shared in the mettle of these women of long ago, and who could laugh well—that great royal Tudor laugh—at the rude performances of her subjects.

Music was always a great feature of these pageants and processions. "Mynstralcy of harp and lute," or of "small pypis," or that of "orgon pleyinge," formed a part of the greeting which came to Prince Edward from the stages whereon S. Edward, the prophets, or "the iii Kyngs of Colen" or "seint George" were shadowed forth. There were four chosen minstrels or city waits, and it may be remembered how on one occasion the mayor and aldermen sent for these and bade them go before the throng making their way from Whitley to the city, "which is by the space of a mile largely or more," and pipe and play as they went, "like as the people had done a great conquest or victory." The waits played also on less stirring occasions than the opening of Bristow's meadows, being greatly in request at the banquets of the guilds and crafts,¹ and much sought after in all the country round. They wore silver chains and badges charged with the arms of the city,² and besides occasional fees given for their performance during feasts, they received a regular "quarterededge," that is to say, a penny from every citizen having "a hallplace," and a halfpenny from every one dwelling in a cottage four times a year for their maintenance.³

The citizens themselves delighted in music; some

¹ The carpenters in 1464 paid 8d. to the minstrels at the feast (Sharp, 213); the dyers paid 2d. (*ib.*, 214).

² *Ib.*, 209

³ *Ib.*, 207.

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must have been practised singers, as the representation of the Corpus Christi pageants was diversified by songs. One of these, a lullaby from the tailors' and sheremen's play, is so pretty that it will well bear quotation.

“Lully, lulla, thow littell tine child,
By by, lully lullay, thow littell tyne child,
By by lully lullay.
O sisters too, how may we do
For to preserve this day
This pore yongling, for whom we do singe,
By by lully lullay?”

Herod, the king, in his raging
Chargid he hath this day
His men of might in his owne sight
All yonge children to slay.

That wo is me, pore child, for thee,
And ever morne and may
For thi parting nether say nor singe
By by, lully lullay.”

The provision of these games, pageants and processions must have entailed great cost and labour, yet every member of the various fellowships helped to support them, and bore as well his part in the common labours and duties involved in his citizenship. Every one was compelled to obey the mayor's summons under penalty of a fine, whether called upon to come to the leet, or the council, or to help in the common labour of the town. In 1451, when wars were threatening, the call went round for all to come and aid in the work of cleansing the town ditch.¹ The summons went twice round the town according to the watch, we are told, in “right great charge and in special” to the poor folk, who had to leave their other occupations in consequence, besides paying their quota towards the taxes, which were necessarily heavy at that time. And the council hearing thereof ordered that £12, 10s. should be collected from

¹ *Leet Book*, 258.

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“thrifty” men to pay for the work, and the poor people spared, save that labourers earning 4d. a day were to pay 1d. or 2d. towards the required sum. In addition to their labour in the common defence, all citizens were required to make one of the company of watchmen when their turn came round, or to find a substitute. Fifteen men usually kept the nightly watch, but in times of disturbance their number was increased; thus in 1450 it was enacted that “forty men of decent, good and honest communication and strong in body . . . shall nightly watch and guard the city from the ninth hour until the beating of the bell called daybell,”¹ and the light enabled all to see thief or enemy approach.

Neither were the citizens permitted to shirk the common military duties. At the “view of arms” all the freemen appeared in military accoutrement as suited their degree, and the threat of a siege turned artisans into soldiers and aldermen and councillors “for savegard of the cite” into captains of the wards and guardians of the gates. In 1469—the year of the battle of Edgcote—the city was changed into a very arsensal and barracks, so lively were the military preparations going forward at that time. The city accounts show the heavy charges which the distribution of arms and armour entailed upon the public purse.

“Item,” says the *Leet Book*, “delyvered to Robert Onley on Maudelyn day a serpentyne . . . for the Newe yate and a honde gunne with a pyke in the ynde and a fowler.” To John Hadley for Bishop Gate “i staffe gunne.” “Item delyvered to William Saunders, meyr, ii staffe gunnes and a grett gunne with iii chamburs, iii jacks and xxiv arowys.” “Item . . . to John Wyldgris i gunne with iii chamburs.” There also follows the mention of the distribution of jacks and arrows to the various captains,² until possibly the supplies ran short, and the last obtained but “i newe jacke and a

¹ *Leet Book*, 253.

² *Ib.*, 345.

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olde." In the "Lenton" of 1471 the scene was repeated. Guns and pelettes were again delivered to the captains for the gates, and money was hastily collected throughout the wards for the company of soldiers who followed my lord of Warwick to Barnet Field, whereby the citizens incurred King Edward's enmity and great displeasure.

The provision of soldiers according to the terms of the commissions of array, so common in civil warfare, were a heavy tax on municipal resources. When the city officers were ordered by the King's commission to send the local forces to join the royal army, the corporation had to "reteyn" their contingent, provide their dresses, badges and equipment, appoint a captain, and collect money, according to assessment, throughout the wards for their pay. At the beginning of the civil war all went merrily enough, and the citizens threw themselves with right good will into the equipment of the soldiers who were to have gone to St Alban's. But in a few years the artizans, called from their homes and business, were heartily weary of the continual strife, and clamoured for 12d. a day in payment. The hiring of recruits must have become a more difficult matter as time went on, though, like the clinching of all bargains in the Middle Ages, it was accompanied by plentiful drinking. The *Leet Book* records the following items in July 1470, after Edward IV. had summoned a company of archers to a rendezvous at Nottingham: "dedit ad le sowders ad bibendum xvid.," . . . "a gallon wyne vid.," . . . "pro ale to the sowders vid."¹ But even after the Wars of the Roses were over we have a sorry picture of the numerous inconveniences attending the hiring of troops. In February 1481, Edward IV. sent commissioners to find out what money or what number of men the burghers would provide in the event of an invasion of Scotland in

¹ *Leet Book*, 357.

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the summer. After various discussions, commandings and countermandings, it was finally agreed that sixty men should be waged for the royal service for a quarter of a year at a cost of £148, 6s. 6d.; recruits were found and arrows and salets distributed amongst them. More, however, was to be wrung from the reluctant burghers; £40 was collected from 180 of the "most sufficient" men of the town to provide horses and jackets for the soldiery.¹ But sixty archers were not deemed a sufficient contingent by the Court; and when in the following June Lord Rivers came to know if the number could be increased, the mayor called a "Hall" of divers out of every ward to know what the common will was in this matter, and it was finally ordained that the citizens should equip and pay forty additional men, bringing up the number to 100. As all the recruits could not be drawn from the ranks of the townsfolk, the worthy men enlisted the service of strangers, and these had to be kept together, housed and fed, at great trouble and cost² until the time for departure. In the end, however, the levy was countermanded, and the troops thus laboriously collected were merely dispersed; ³ a statement of facts the town clerk may be pardoned for recording in a murmuring and discontented spirit.

But however onerous these duties may have been, the Coventry men were loyally proud of their city and citizenship. Albeit a traveller, the mediæval merchant loved, as he loved nothing else on earth, the small stretch of land enclosed by the walls of his native town. He or his ancestors had won and maintained at great cost the city's liberties, and he and they spared no pains to make

¹ *Leet Book*, 476-481.

² 6d. a week was collected from all the citizens of the mayor's rank, and 4d. and 2d. from those of the sheriff's and warden's rank respectively to pay for the soldiers' board.

³ *Leet Book*, 488.

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it beautiful. Historians are wont to depise the English burgher of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, by reason of his insignificance and poverty, and his neglect of the highest forms of art, and pointedly contrast his small achievements with those of the merchant princes of Italy, or the proud and daring members of the Hanseatic League. It is true he was a commonplace person, living in what was for his country a commonplace age ; nevertheless his doings are worthy of remembrance. If the English townsfolk never produced a Van Eyck or a Da Vinci, a Peter Fischer or a Donatello, they patronised all the local forms of art they knew. They had the same great delight in the common possession of a beautiful object as the people of the Italian republics. Though they lacked wealth to build themselves tall and stately houses like their brethren on the Continent, the English burghers could raise tall steeples, build vast churches, adorn their common halls, and rear exquisite crosses in the market place. The fifteenth century glass in S. Mary's Hall, Coventry, still attests the skill of John Thornton, a native of the city, and one of the first acts of the council of Forty-eight was to decree that a cross should be set up in the Cheaping, which was done, though at a cost of £50.¹ In Coventry, as elsewhere, the rich merchants and craftsmen set carvers to carve the miserere seats—enjoying the grim humour these sometimes display, a quality which crops up everywhere in the fifteenth century, even now and then in legal documents—and bade the engraver commemorate the dead by tracing their effigies on brass, or the mason by fashioning their portraits in stone.

Neither should we regard as contemptible the Englishman's achievements in trade and travel. The Merchant Adventurers, in the teeth of the opposition of the Staplers and the Hanseatic League, first by piracy and chance

¹ *Leet Book*, 57, 68.

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trading and then by organised and chartered commerce, filled the North Sea with their ships, founded settlements at Bergen and Antwerp, and on the ruins of their rivals built up one of the most successful trading companies of northern Europe. English merchants carried from Crete or Lisbon the precious stores of eastern wine and spices, and brought their bales of wool to the port of Pisa to supply the makers of Florentine cloth, or to the ports of Normandy to supply the looms of northern France.¹

But it is not for his patronage of art or for his enterprise in foreign trade that the English burgher is chiefly noteworthy, but rather for his "politic guiding" of the cities in which he lived. Pirates, perhaps, on the Narrow Seas, he and his fellows were at home, for the most part, law-abiding men. A certain innate conservatism, a truly British love of appeal to custom and precedent, marks their rule, and, although the populace was frequently unquiet and discontented, the result was, on the whole, happy and successful. If the dangers of foreign commerce made them hardy and fearless, their political and civic life, with its manifold responsibilities, taught them a prudence and worldly wisdom, which appears in all their transactions. Never were men who paid such heed to the Gospel precept, "Be ye wise as serpents." Liable to be deserted or oppressed by the King, thwarted by the open violence or secret maintenance of some great noble or the factiousness of some fellow-burgher, their self-reliance turned these necessities to "glorious gain." It is true that we meet with little heroism, and few distinct types of character. The men of this class can boast of no individuals who can be rightly considered as important historical figures. Like the great Gothic architects, these men, who built up such a flourishing and successful society, have been chary of leaving their names to us. Now and then, however, a bit of grimy and neglected parchment reveals a striking

¹ Green, i. 90-120.

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history. We see the clothes they wore and hear the words they said. The quarrel resounds once more in the guild-hall. The stern recorder testifies against the supposed factiousness of Laurence Saunders; and the aged men, lifting up their hands, swear to the ancient extent of the common pasture. These are not heroic or world-known scenes, but they represent the life of the citizens of an old-time city, men whose labours are not entirely forgotten.

CHAPTER XVI

Old Coventry at the Present Day

COVENTRY is well worth a whole day's visit, though the day may be an easy one, as the principal buildings lie very near together, and *are practically always open*, so that no time need be wasted ringing up this or that caretaker or running after the sacristan. Either the powers that be have little leisure to think of tourists, or they must be men of singular enlightenment, for I know of no place which can be seen so freely and cheaply, where lingering over a charming effect, a boss, inscription or painted window may be done with such pleasure because interruption is so rare.¹ The tourist will show his wisdom by not going too far afield in his sight-seeing; the three churches and S. Mary's Hall will, with a passing look at many a picturesque narrow street, carved gable, or interesting relic of old Coventry, furnish him with some hours' occupation. Those, of course, who possess indomitable physical and mental energy may ascend S. Michael's spire for the view's sake, or brave a walk through the somewhat dreary environs of Coventry to the historic but commonplace-looking strip of land known as Gosford Green.² Or, if they are proof against the depressing influence of the workhouse—for into this building the remains of the

¹ This is a condition of things tourists ought to be thankful for; it is unhappily rare. S. Michael's closes at 5 o'clock in summer, 4 o'clock in winter; the other churches at 4 all the year round. The sight-seer ought to have an opera glass.

² See p. 102.

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Carmelite monastery have been incorporated—may follow the line of Much Park Street to Whitefriars, and there see the fine monastic cloister, with its fifteenth-century groining, which now serves as the paupers' dining-room.¹

Castle and monastery have been destroyed in Coventry, and, after all, nobles and monks had very little to do with the making of the city, which, in 1381, was the fifth, and about seventy years later the fourth, among the cities of the kingdom. A fortunate junction of high roads, and the enterprise of the inhabitants, accounts for the great riches and large population during those seventy years. *And mark that the most noteworthy buildings were raised within this period:* the churches of S. Michael, and the Holy Trinity, and S. Mary's Hall. S. John's church is a little earlier in date. During this period the people of Coventry were possessed with a magnificent frenzy, such as shames our modern efforts, for building and making their city beautiful. That is to say, within a little over two generations the inhabitants of a town of what we should call now nowadays contemptible smallness, for it contained at first a population of only about 7000, and later certainly no more than 10,000 souls, raised two parish churches of unusual size, and a fine town hall. One of these churches is indeed the largest in the kingdom, and possesses a spire almost unrivalled in height and beauty. They also kept their fortifications in good repair during this period, and raised—to speak of inconsiderable trifles—a market cross, which has unfortunately perished, besides lending to all the buildings their bounty was making or had made, all the riches of suitable adornment that the carpenter's, carver's, painter's, glazier's, weaver's and goldsmith's art could devise. Much has perished in the destruction of the cathedral, the friars' and other chapels, the cross, a parish church, a guild-hall, and many unremembered buildings; but enough remains to show that we owe a great debt to

¹ See p. 164.

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those dear, dead folk who knew so many things we have forgotten and loved so many things we have ceased to care for, and above all, knew what to do with stone and glass and metal, and loved their handiwork, for it was good.

Women have always been to the fore in Coventry ; the names rise of S. Osburg, Godiva, Isabella, Margaret of Anjou, of the virgin sisters Botoner, who built the spire, and of Joan Ward, the first Coventry Lollard martyr. Women of the city, too, helped to keep out Charles I. Here Sarah Kemble (Mrs Siddons) was married and Miss Ellen Terry born. It is fitting that the chief literary interest of Coventry should centre in a woman's name. George Eliot went to school at a house in the south-west end of Warwick Row, 1832-5. Coventry is said to be the original of Middlemarch, and S. Mary's Hall is described in the trial scene in *Adam Bede*.

In coming from the station down Warwick Row, as you pass the angle of Greyfriars' Green, look at the modern statue of Sir Thomas White, merchant, Lord Mayor of London in 1555, founder of S. John's College, Oxford, and benefactor of the city of Coventry. Other famous folk connected with the city were Laurence Saunders, the Marian martyr, who was led out to die in the park to the right of Christ church, the spire of which is close before you, while John Marston, satirist, writer of plays, friend and foe of Ben Jonson, was born here. Perhaps some day our cousins from over the Atlantic may raise a tribute to the memory of John Davenport, Puritan, of this city, who, after a troubled career as pastor in the city of London, fled to Amsterdam ; and finally, in 1637, at the invitation of John Cotton, departed for New England, where he lived as pastor of Newhaven for very many years ; and, after much controversy concerning baptism, and writing of books, departed this life at Boston on March 13, 1670. Others

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may feel more interest in his brother or kinsman, Christopher, a convert to Romanism, and hence the religious antipodes of the aforesaid John. After a sojourn at Douay, this Franciscan friar became chaplain to Queen Henrietta Maria, and subsequently to her daughter-in-law, Catherine of Braganza, wife of Charles II. He died in 1680, and was buried at the Savoy Chapel, London. Being suspected of designs for promoting the union of the English and Roman Churches, it was one of the indictments against Archbishop Laud that he held frequent converse with Christopher Davenport. Other notable folk have at one time or another lived within the city. Sir William Dugdale, Garter King-at-Arms under Charles II., author of the *Monasticon* and the *Antiquities of Warwickshire*, "maestro" and "autore" of all such as love the lore of the famous shire of Warwick, received his education at the Free Grammar School. While Humphrey Wanley, to whose skill and knowledge the British Museum owes—not the gift—but the collection and arrangement of the Harleian manuscripts, while he held the post of librarian under Harley, Earl of Oxford, in Queen Anne's time, was son of a vicar of Trinity church, one Nathaniel Wanley, whose book *Wonders of the Little World*, was greatly loved by Browning.

Full in front is the view of the "three tall spires." The nearest, that of Christ church,¹ is all that remains of the far-famed chapel of the Greyfriars, wherein so many local notables and members of noble families lay buried. The church having been demolished at the suppression of the monasteries under Henry VIII., the steeple remained a solitary landmark until 1830, when the body of a new church was added. This is an uninteresting structure, and not worth a visit.

We are now inside the compass of the ancient wall, and those who wish to keep up old illusions, and enter the

¹ See p. 297.

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city by the ancient road, should turn up Warwick Lane, alongside of the Grapes' Inn, avoiding modern Hertford Street, and so along Grey Friars' Lane to High Street and the main thoroughfare of the city. A little below the junction of the Warwick and Grey Friars' Lanes stands Ford's Hospital, a beautiful black and white timbered house with carved gables such as artists love. The windows are of nine lights, divided into threes, with window-headings of fine tracery. In a room over the porch called the chapel are oddments of stained glass. Some of the seventeen old women who are housed there, and daily bless, or should bless, the memory of Master Ford and Master Pisford, merchants, may often be seen sitting in the little inner quadrangular court. Worthy Master Pisford, by his will, dated 1517, made provision for six old men and their wives, "being nigh unto the age of threescore years and above, and such as were of good name and fame, and had been of good honesty and kept household within the said city, and were decayed and come to poverty and great need." Nowadays, however, it is only old women who profit by their benevolence.

On reaching High Street, which is part of the great north-west road, and the old coaching way between London and Holyhead, it is best to go right on down Pepper Lane, which immediately faces you, until you come to S. Michael's churchyard. This broad open space was, and is still, the centre of the life of the town. Here stood the cathedral and the two great parish churches, the house containing the cloth market, and the guild-hall, where the rulers of the city assembled to take council together. Possibly while the churches, as we know them now, and S. Mary's Hall were yet unbuilt, the common assembly of city folk met together here to hold courts, and decide on questions touching the common weal. Now the cathedral and drapery are gone, but the church spire still stands fronting the

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spectator, and a few paces will bring him where, behind the projection of a small black and white cottage, stands the red and crumbling entrance porch of S. Mary's Hall.

Tradition, which we can never afford to disregard, says that S. Michael's Church—spire, tower, chancel, and nave—was built by the Botoners, a great merchant family, further affirming that a brass plate was found in the church, with the following lines engraved upon it:—

“ William and Adam built the tower,
Ann and Mary built the spire,
William and Adam built the church,
Ann and Mary built the quire.”

Undoubtedly the Botoners were wealthy and generous folk, but whether this little quatrain is founded on fact or no, we have no means of proving.

The famous nine-storied steeple, consisting of tower, octagon and spire, whereof the tower, begun in 1371, occupied twenty-one years in building, is 300 feet high or thereabouts, but gains a fictitious appearance of greater height in that it springs immediately from the ground. The architect had a marvellously happy thought when he added the flying buttresses, which connect the pinnacles of the main tower with the octagon above it, converting a mere tall spire into a “star-ypointing” thing of lightness and beauty.¹ The stone figures in the niches are modern; the ancient ones, worth inspection though worn past identification, have been placed in the crypt, to which entrance is gained on the north side of the church. It is perhaps the finest specimen of the florid Perpendicular spire in England. The decoration is concentrated in the storeys easily seen, *i.e.* the upper ones of the tower, gradually dying away as the eye travels upwards. The steeple recently underwent restoration under Mr Oldrid Scott, and whatever was

¹ Contrast the outline of Trinity spire—work of the seventeenth century. See Bond, *Eng. Architecture*, p. 633.

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gained in stability by the process, much was lost with the look of old age which vanished with the crumbling surface of the ancient stone.

Before entering the church by the south door notice the rare round trefoil-headed arch of the south porch, earliest portion of the church, a few steps beyond, opposite the door of S. Mary's Hall. What first strikes the spectator on entering is the great size of the building, a fact mainly owing to the simplicity of the ground plan, no space being lost in transepts, and to the absence of any partition or arch between nave and chancel, so that from the west end there is an uninterrupted view of the entire church. From this spaciousness and simplicity comes a grandeur which mere size could never wholly give. The style of architecture—of the kind called "Perpendicular"—shows that the fabric belongs to the end of the fourteenth and the first half of the fifteenth century, the choir being older than the nave, which dates from 1434 to 1450. It has been suggested that the building was just complete when Henry VI. paid his visit to the church in 1451.

The width of the arches and slighness of the pillars display the technical skill of the architects of this period, who, by a just distribution of weight, etc., contrived to raise churches of maximum size at a minimum expense of material and labour. It is a church where a large congregation may be comfortably housed, but it has the great defect of the later style of Gothic building,—all sense of mystery and aspiration, with which the lofty roof and high-pointed arch of the earlier periods impress the beholder, are wholly absent.

On looking up from the west end, a curious break in the line of the roof at the junction of nave and chancel is very apparent. The choir inclines to the north, and in so doing furnishes an architectural problem difficult of solution.¹ It is curious that the tower,

¹ Woodhouse, *Churches of Coventry*, 44.

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which is not central with the nave, is in line with the choir.

The lantern at the west end has been opened out since the recent restoration, and the sight of the beautiful groining of the roof is not one that should be missed. The nave has six bays; and in the clear-story windows of both nave and chancel the mullions are carried down until they meet the line of the arch; in the chancel the scheme is more decorative, and over the central arch of the three bays the window is a four-light one.

The step between nave and chancel is of oak and may have been the ancient sill of the rood-screen.¹

The church is somewhat poor in detail, having suffered from the zeal of reformers, and from the ignorance and carelessness of "Bumbledom" in the succeeding centuries. At the Reformation there came down a fellow with a "counterfeit commission," and for "avoiding of superstition" tore up all the memorial brasses on the tombs, so that those that are left date from Elizabethan times—or later—and are of small interest. In a "restoration" of 1851 there was a regular "double twilight" among the tombs, which were taken up from their original resting-places, and deposited wherever the restorer thought fit. Amongst those thus displaced, and now standing at the west end of the north aisle, was the alabaster tomb of Julines Nethermyl, a worthy draper of the city, whose family entered the ranks of the squirearchy of Warwickshire, and bore arms like gentlefolk. In the front of the tomb is a bas-relief of Julines and his wife, with their five sons and five daughters, and the following inscription:—

"Hic jacit Julianus Nethermyl, pannarius, quondam Maior hujus civitatis, qui obiit xi die mensis Aprilis anno domini MDXXXIX., et Johanna, uxor ejus, quorum animabus propitiatur Deus. Amen."²

¹ Woodhouse, 45.

² Poole, 150.

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The various crafts or trading companies had special chapels allotted to their use before the Reformation ; the dyers, the present baptistery ; the cappers, one adjoining the south aisle, while in a little parvise over the south porch, they still meet once a year, transact the company's business, eat, drink, and spread upon the table the venerable velvet cloth, once a pall, an interesting relic, albeit torn and faded, of the days when the making of cloth caps was one of the main industries of the city. The smiths and girdlers had chapels off the north aisle ; and the drapers and mercers the space at the east end of the north and south aisles respectively. It was from its place among its fellows in the drapers' chapel that Nethermyl's tomb was brought, and many others stand behind a railing in the Mercers' Chapel in the south aisle. Here is a much defaced early Renaissance erection, traditionally known as "Wayd's tomb," and a most interesting relic of a city officer in the memorial to Dame Elizabeth Swyllington and her two husbands, one of whom, Ralph Swyllington, was sometime recorder of the city. Round the tomb is the legend : "Orate pro anima Elizabethhe Swyllington, vidue, nuper uxoris Radulphi Swillyngton, Attornati Generalis Domini Regis Henrici octavi, Recordatoris Civitatis Coventrensis ; quondam uxoris Thome Essex, armigeri ; que quidem Elizabeth obiit anno domini millesimo CCCCC—." ¹ The worthy attorney-general and recorder lies on the side nearest the spectator ; the squire, Master Thomas Essex, in armour, on the side farthest off ; Dame Elizabeth, wearing a pedimental head-dress, her hands raised in supplication, in the middle. The dame, the date of whose death is unknown, as the tomb was erected in her lifetime, lived at Stivic-hall, near Coventry, and gave £140 for the support of the poor and repair of roads in the neighbourhood of the city. Master Swyllington, who was made recorder in 1515, doubtless discharged his duties with all faith-

¹ Poole, 142.

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fulness, but I know of no memorable event in which he figures during his tenure of office.

All the pre-Reformation brasses save the one commemorating Thomas Bond are gone. One in the west end on the north aisle shows Maria Hinton (1594) and four swaddled babes. She was the wife of that Archdeacon of Coventry and Vicar of S. Michael's who had such a troublesome correspondence with James I. about non-kneeling communicants. Another in the south aisle shows the figure of Ann Sewell (1609) kneeling in prayer. The inscription runs:—

“ Her zealous care to serve her God
Her constant love to husband deare,
Her harmless harte to everie one,
Doth live, although her corps lie here.
God graunte us all, while glass doth run
To live in Christ as she has done.”

“ Ann Sewell, ye wife of William Sewell, of this cytty, vintner, departed this life ye 20th of December, 1609, of the age of 46 yeares. An humble follower of her Saviour Christ, and a worthy stirrer up of others to all holy virtues.”

The Sewell family, which gave two mayors to Coventry, have a great many American descendants.

On the wall near the south porch is a brass to Gervase Scrope (1705), who describes himself “as an old toss'd Tennis Ball.”

In the Cappers' Chapel by the south porch are the Hopkins' tombs; and in the Dyers' Chapel is a monument to female friendship commemorating Dame Bridgman and Mrs Eliza Samwell. Above “Wayd's” tomb in the Mercers' Chapel is a monument to Lady Sheffington (1637), whose husband is described as a “true moaneing turtle.”

In the Drapers' or Lady Chapel, which is divided from the north aisle by an oak screen, we are continually reminded of the powerful Trinity guild, as well as the

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drapers' company, whose priests said daily service here. This part of the church was chosen as a burial place for the chief members of the latter society. In a brass plate let into the north wall of the chapel you may see the memorial inscription to the most notable of these:—
“Here lyeth Mr Thomas Bond, draper, sometime mayor of this cittie, and founder of the Hospitall of Bablake, who gave divers lands and tenements for the maintenance of ten poore men so long as the world shall endure, and a woman look to them, with many other good guifts; and died the xviii day of March, in the yeare of our Lord God MDVI.”

Bond's Hospital still stands by S. John the Baptist's church. May it endure—as the epitaph has it—as long as the world itself.

The dark oak roof of the chapel is ancient, and in some cases angels carrying shields are figured on the corbels. The first of these, at the east end of the north wall, bears, however, the *Agnus Dei*, a reference to S. John the Baptist, one of the patrons of the guild; the next a pelican “in her piety,” *i.e.* feeding her young from her own breast, a symbol of Christ.

The Communion-table is of seventeenth-century work; there are curious poppy-heads in this chapel; and on the other side of the screen, which is made up of ancient fragments, is an old oak chest showing that favourite Coventry subject, the Coronation of the Virgin, with swans, Tudor roses and grotesques.

The miserere seats are worth inspection, though the carving is somewhat rough. They seem to fall into three classes, illustrating:—

1. *The labours of life.*
2. *The saints of the guild.*
3. *The certainty of death, and judgment to come*, illustrated by the favourite mediæval series, the *Dance of Death*.

They may be taken in the following order, beginning with the north wall:—

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First series.—Labours of life.

1. A man thrashing ; a man bat-fowling (agriculture and hunting).

2. Shepherd piping (pastoral life).

Second series.—Saints of the guild.

3. (*Defaced.*) Decapitation of a martyr, perhaps S. John the Baptist.

4. (*Defaced.*) The Assumption of the Virgin.

Third series.—Dance of Death.

5. A burial scene. Two men are laying the body, wrapped in a winding sheet, in an open grave ; a priest, holding a torch in his hand, and two attendants stand near ; mattock and spade are beside the grave.¹ On either side of the central carving Death is represented leading a mortal—in this case the pope—by the hand.

6. A man is being stripped of his shirt, symbolical perhaps of the fact that in dying we must relinquish all worldly possessions. A cripple, whom by the irony of fate Death has spared, watches the process of unclothing. The side subject has been cut off, but Death's companion is a bishop ; see the outline of his mitre.

7. A death-bed scene ; the sick person is in bed, his friends surround him.

8. The tree of Jesse. "The Word was made flesh."

9. The Last Judgment.

10. Grotesque.

11. The chaining of Satan.

12.

13. Grotesque.

14.

The church terminates in a five-sided apse, with five large, slightly pointed windows. The modern coloured glass of the three central ones is a miracle of ugliness, but the two outer ones are composed of fragments of ancient stained glass, out of which it is impossible, however, to distinguish any connected group. Figures of

¹ Poole, 145.

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the cherubim standing on wheels are scattered about the various lights, still in fair preservation. Other fragments show the Apocalyptic Lamb, the kiss of Judas, and the description of the Trinity beginning, "Pater est Deus," etc.¹ In the clear-story windows may also be seen more of these beautiful, but sadly fragmentary remnants of ancient glass. In one of these on the south side, the scissors, which were the mark of the tailors' and shere-men's company, are conspicuous.

The chancel roof is lower than the nave, and the two levels are connected by a cove on which was once a fresco of the Archangel overcoming Satan,¹ fragments of which are preserved though not *in situ*.

Painted on the beam above the cove which spans the nave between the rood piers are traces of an old Latin hymn on the nine orders of angels (a facsimile will be found in the vestry) :

" Archangeli presunt ciuitatibus.
Potestates presunt demonibus.
Dominaciones presunt spiritibus angelicis.
Cherubyn habent omnem scienciam.
Principalitates presunt bonis hominibus.
Virtutes faciunt mirabilia.
Seraphyn ardent in armore dei.
Troni eorum est iudicare.
Angeli sunt nuncii domini."

Opposite the south porch of S. Michael's is the entrance to S. Mary's hall, the banqueting room and meeting-place of the guild of the Holy Trinity, S. Mary, S. John Baptist and S. Catherine, and the centre for the transaction of all municipal business. The great north window, of which the mullions bear trace of a recent restoration, is visible from the street, and from an opening in the front to the hall, long since blocked up, it was customary to proclaim the acts of leet passed by the fathers of the city to the crowd below. Built as it was for the honour and glory of this guild, whose members

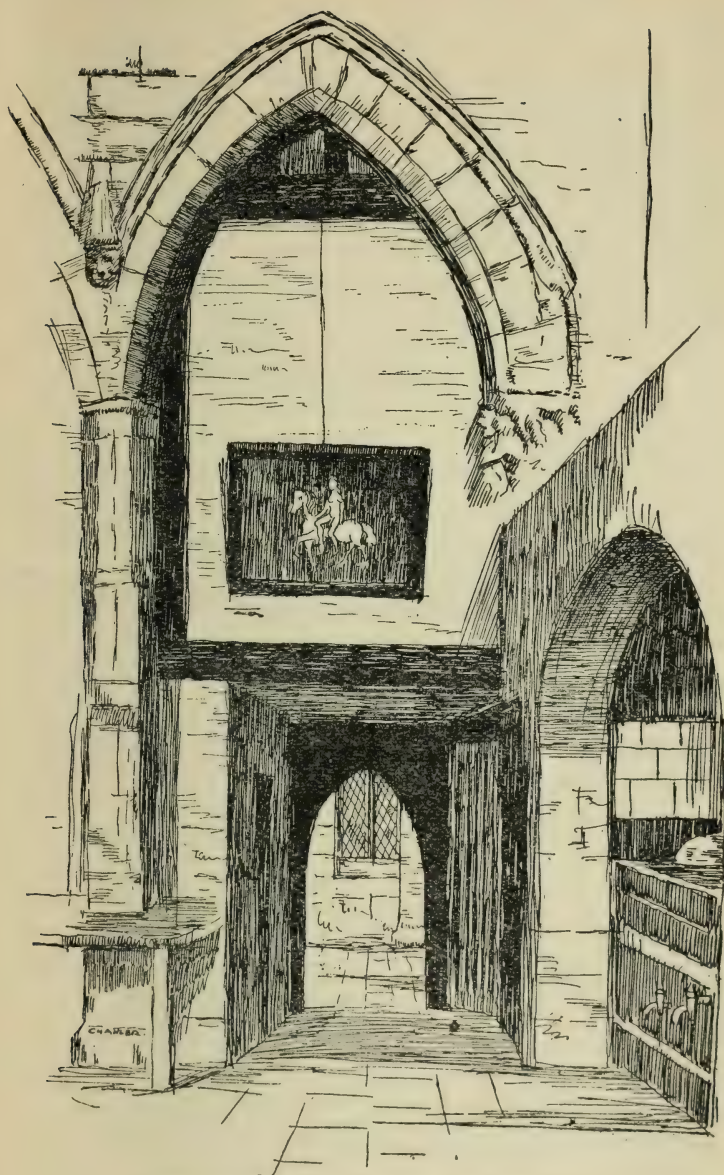
¹ Brooks, S. Michael's Church.

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were the chief folk of the city, the building is full of detail reminding us of the patron saints of this fraternity. We shall see this more clearly later, when we come to examine the tapestry which hangs in the Hall itself. In the meantime note that the porch, which gives entrance to the court-yard, bears on its keystone a carving, representing the Coronation of the Virgin, and from one of the stones, whence the inward arch springs, is a sculpture of the Annunciation, now almost unrecognisable, save that on the inner side the feathers of S. Gabriel's wings are to be clearly made out. To the right of the court-yard, underneath the great Hall, is the entrance to the crypt, two beautifully proportioned chambers with plain groined roof, probably once a store-house, now a receptacle for lumber. In the end chamber or "tavern" is a fine carving of a lion. On the western side are the cupboard-like openings in the wall, intended, Sharp thinks, to receive the deeds and valuable property belonging to members of the guild.

On the south side of the court-yard is the fourteenth-century kitchen, full of memories of the great feasts which were once cooked there, and whence dishes were borne smoking hot up the stairs to the Hall above. Now the modern cooking appliances stand out in all their incongruity. Here is the old whipping-post, and in the roof is an ancient louvre or smoke-vent. In the window stands a statue which came from the now demolished cross. It probably represents Henry VI. The arches on the north side bear rudely sculptured figures of angels, each holding a shield on which is a merchant's mark, bearing the initials J. P., *i.e.* John Percy (living 1392), a benefactor of the guild.¹ On the ground floor is the new muniment room. (For admission apply to the hall-keeper.) When inside the pretty little modern Gothic

¹ Memorials of the visit of the British Archæological Institute in 1864. The kitchen is part of the original building, and belongs to the middle of the fourteenth century.



ENTRANCE TO KITCHEN. ST MARY'S HALL

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chamber, ask the hall-keeper to point out Ranulf's charter, and notice the beautiful twelfth-century writing, which you can contrast with the more fanciful hand of the great charter of Edward III. The *Leet Book*, from which so much contained in this history has been obtained, stands on one of the bookshelves which line part of the room. The *Letter-Book* is usually open at Elizabeth's letter, 1569, referring to the safe-keeping of Mary, Queen of Scots. The municipal scales, engraved with the "Elephant," the city arms, are also visible in an inner compartment of this chamber.

If the council is not sitting, the hall-keeper will also show the much restored Mayoress's Parlour, on the upper floor. Here stands the mediæval chair of state, used on great occasions, probably by the mayor and the master of the guild. Only half remains of this magnificent relic. No doubt the side where the guild-master took his seat was sawn off, cast aside as useless on the suppression of this "superstitious" society at the Reformation. The chair bears on one side a figure of the Madonna, "the arms of Coventry surmount the back on the one side, and on the other (which was the centre in its complete state) are two lions rampant supporting a crown."¹ Several portraits line the room, those of John Hales, founder of the Free Grammar School, of Christopher Davenport, mayor of the city, and Sir Thomas White, are of great local interest; others are of Elizabeth, Charles I., and James I., but undoubtedly the most artistic is a curious portrait of Queen Mary, said to be by Zuccherò or Antonio More.

As the Great Hall² served as a banqueting-hall for the Trinity guild, a flight of steps at the south end communicates directly with the kitchen. At the north end was a daïs, where the principal guests took their seats.

¹ Sharp.

² The architecture of the Great Hall shows it was raised after 1392, when the union of the guilds took place.

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The room was also used for municipal purposes, particularly when the town rulers found it necessary to convoke a large assembly of their fellow-citizens. Many a stormy scene has this beautiful room witnessed. Here it was—or in an earlier hall—that the common folk, enraged at the bad quality of bread, threw loaves at the mayor's head when he neglected to punish the frauds of the victuallers. Here Laurence Saunders defied or submitted to the dictates of the corporation, and the citizens met together promising to uphold the mayor and council in their attack on William Bristowe, who had encroached upon the Lammas lands. Here the mayor was elected and courts held. But when the council met, they chose a smaller room communicating with the Great Hall, for privacy's sake.

The armour is a most interesting collection. A great many pieces are Elizabethan, but the "Black Prince's helmet" is a unique sallet of the period of the Wars of the Roses. The right way to study the Hall is to mount the little flight of steps at the southern end, and, sitting in the Minstrel Gallery, behind the array of civic armour, examine the glorious fifteenth-century window at your leisure. A few years back the glass was in utter confusion, having been carelessly replaced after re-leading, and the respective heads, bodies and legs of the magnanimous conquerors and kings therein commemorated were sadly astray, their anatomy being rendered thereby most perplexing. This has, however, been judiciously remedied, and we can now clearly see in the nine compartments—as the artist, possibly William Thornton, or a pupil of his, designed—the figures of the Emperor Constantine, King Arthur, William I., Richard I., Henry III., Edward III., Henry IV., Henry V., and Henry VI., the last occupying the place of honour in the central light. Above are the arms of various nobles and cities, among others the "elephant and castle" of this city, the three "garbs," wheat-sheaves of Chester,

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and the sable eagle of Earl Leofric, the city's earliest benefactor.

The dark oak roof belongs also to the fifteenth century, and is worth, even at the cost of some strain to the muscles of the neck, a careful study. At the centre of each beam are whole-length figures of angels, ten in number, of whom eight are playing on various instruments. The first, close to the great north window, has a violin-like instrument, the second a harp, the third a flute, the fourth a flute, but of a peculiarly flat shape, the fifth a violin, the sixth a curved tube, the seventh a tabor, the eighth a curved tube, while the ninth and tenth have no wings or instruments at all; possibly they represent the "morning stars singing for joy."

Under the great north window hangs a piece of tapestry, dating, so say experts, from the beginning of the sixteenth century. It is of Flemish design, and was woven, possibly in England, with the intention of filling the place it now occupies. Faded in colour, often blurred in outline, the tapestry still remains a glorious memorial to the love of beauty and artistic workmanship and corporate pride of the great guild. It is divided into six compartments, and represents a king, queen, and their Court adoring the Virgin, the Trinity, and divers saints in glory; being undoubtedly designed to commemorate the admission of a king and queen into the ranks of the Trinity guild—an event which did actually occur in 1500 in the case of Henry VII. and Elizabeth of York. Among the company of saints the place of honour is given to those who were the chosen patrons of the guild. Unfortunately the tapestry has not come down to us in the condition in which it left the makers' hands. The figure of Justice holding the scales is obviously out of harmony with the whole design. There is no doubt that the personification of the Trinity, God the Father on the throne holding Christ extended upon the Cross, with the Dove, once occupied this space.

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The Hebrew letters of the word Jehovah found above the cross still remain, but the reformers, who could not endure the representation of this mystery, cut out the rest.¹ Round the present incongruous figure of Justice kneel angels bearing the instruments of the Passion, the nails, the sponge of hyssop, the crown of thorns, the scourge, pillar and spear. The Assumption of the Virgin in the lower central compartment reminded the guildsmen of their earliest patroness, whose festival was one of their chief days of assembly. The Virgin's feet rest on the crescent moon, which is supported by an angel. The apostles kneel round in attitudes of adoration. On either side of the lower tier a king kneels in prayer, on the right a queen, traditionally identified with Henry VI. and Margaret of Anjou; this attribution has not gone unchallenged; and it is at least possible that the contemporary king and queen, Henry VII. and Elizabeth of York, may be intended; the heraldic roses in the border are, however, Lancastrian and not Tudor. The King kneels at a table whereon lie a crown and missal; he wears a jewelled cap. None of his followers can be identified save the kneeling cardinal, who probably is intended for Beaufort, Bishop of Winchester (or Cardinal Morton), and the standing figure behind the King, who may be the "good Duke Humphrey" (or Henry, Prince of Wales). The Queen kneels opposite. None of her ladies can be identified. The Queen has a head-dress embroidered with pear-pearls, upon which is a crown of fleur-de-lys, her dress is yellow, and the sleeves lined with ermine. Of the three ladies who kneel behind her the third is obviously a child.²

In the upper left-hand division is a group of male, on the right-hand a group of female, saints respectively led

¹ Sharp, *Antiq.* 221.

² Miss Howard (*Englishwoman*, Jan., 48, 1911) identifies the feminine group with Elizabeth's daughters and sisters and mother-in-law, Margaret Beaufort.

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by the patrons of the guild, S. John the Baptist and S. Catherine. The former are the less interesting company; they consist of S. John the Baptist bearing the book and *Agnus Dei*; the next is probably S. Thomas, holding a lance. There follow S. Paul with a sword; S. Adrian, patron of brewers, standing on a lion, and holding a sword and an anvil, instrument of his martyrdom; S. Peter with the key; S. George holding a banner, but, oddly enough, with no dragon at his feet; S. Andrew with a transverse cross; S. Bartholomew with a knife; S. Simon with a saw; and S. Thaddeus with a halberd. In the opposite division stands an array of saints in charming Tudor dress; S. Catherine with her wheel; S. Barbara with the tower; S. Dorothea with the basket of roses; S. Mary Magdalene with the vase of ointment; S. Margaret, name-saint of the queen who kneels in the compartment beneath, with a queer, flabby, spotted demon curling round her body; S. Agnes with a delightful little lamb, which she holds by a string. Then follows an abbess, concerning whose identity there has been much discussion. She is arrayed in a monastic habit, bears a crozier, and has three white mice about her person, one on either shoulder, and another springing in the air above. This is S. Gertrude of Nivelles in Flanders,¹ patroness of travellers, and maybe also of the locality where the tapestry was designed. Noted far and wide for hospitality in her lifetime, the saint did not cease her ministrations to wayfarers after death. The journey to Paradise is a long one, occupying three days, so that the popular fancy said that the souls slept with S. Gertrude on the first night, with S. Gabriel on the second, and the third they rested in Paradise. "The saint therefore became," says Mr Baring Gould, "the patroness and protector of departed souls. Next because popular Teutonic superstition regarded rats and mice as symbols of souls, S. Gertrude is represented in art as

¹ Sharp, *op. cit.*, 222.

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attended by one of these animals. Then, by a strange transition when the significance of the symbol was lost, she was supposed to be a protectress against rats and mice, and water from the crypt at Nivelles was distributed for the purpose of driving away these vermin." It may be noted that the two nuns in the compartment of ladies attending upon the queen, wear the same habit as S. Gertrude. The next saint of the company is usually identified with S. Anne, but on what grounds I am unable to discover. She bears a long staff (or taper) in her hand. Now the saint likely to be associated with S. Gertrude would be her godchild, S. Gudule, patroness of the cathedral of Brussels. Her appropriate symbol is, however, a lantern. But the artist is not very careful about these, and possibly may have substituted the taper. In this case the demon hovering over S. Apollonia, who follows next, bearing her pincers, really belongs to S. Gudule, and is a reminiscence of the saint's nocturnal difficulties in keeping her lantern alight, so persistently did the evil spirit blow it out.

After examining the tapestry there is little to detain you. The oriel window contains some fragments of old glass; on the floor are some ancient tiles; small figures from the ancient cross also stand in the recess. The inscriptions about the Hall are reproductions of Elizabethan black letter which once adorned the ancient wainscotting. A brass commemorating the lease of Cheylesmore Park, granted to the citizens by the Duke of Northumberland in the reign of Edward VI., is fixed in the wall close to the entrance to the Mayoress's Parlour. It is dated 1568. As for the terrible windows, filled with glass in 1826 in imitation of the old work which had been destroyed in an affray concerning a contested election of 1780, known as the "bludgeon fight," let us not speak of them. At the south end of the hall is (right) the Prince's Chamber, leading to the ancient stone-roined treasury in the tower, and contain-



MAYORESS' PARLOUR, SHOWING STATE-CHAIR

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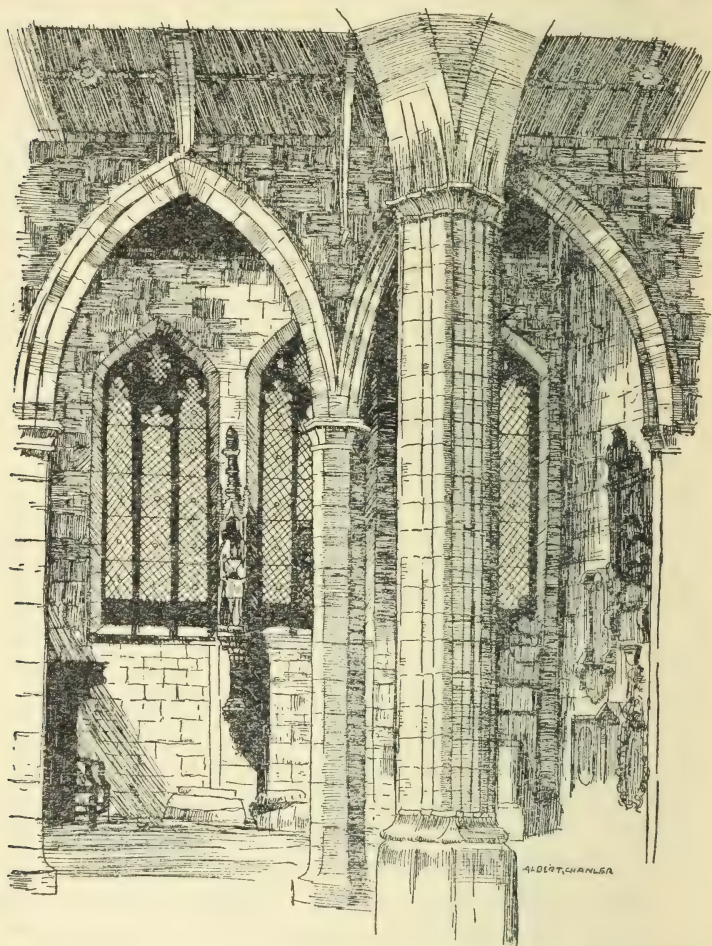
ing fragments of carving, one a figure of S. George and the Dragon from S. George's chapel at Gosford gate, and (left) the Council-Chamber, which has been recently wainscotted with Jacobean carving brought from a house in Earl Street. There is a fine Jacobean fireplace, an old chair, and an Elizabethan drawing-table in the room. At the back of the minstrel-gallery is the Armoury, where lies, in neglect and dust, a large picture, "The Baccanali," by Luca Giordano; and at the back of the armoury is Queen Mary's Chamber, the traditional place of confinement of the Scottish Queen in 1569.

Crossing the churchyard, you arrive at Trinity Church whereof the spire was rebuilt in the seventeenth century. The exterior, which has been frequently recased, suffers somewhat from the neighbourhood of S. Michael's, but the interior is of earlier and more finely proportioned architecture than its giant neighbour. Rebuilt at the close of the fourteenth century on the site of a parish church, which existed at least as far back as the reign of Henry III., this building is also full of problems, and is in some respects most interesting of all the churches of Coventry. The jambs of blocked windows at various levels are fruitful of speculations on the original appearance of the church, and a piscina high up on the wall of south transept proclaims the former existence of an upper chapel, with a floor level over a vaulted passage, which was done away with for probably quite insufficient reasons in 1834. The church, which was served by twelve parochial and two chantry priests before the Reformation, contained fifteen altars; while in the Lady-chapel a priest held services, taking a stipend from the Corpus Christi guild.

The earliest part of the church is the thirteenth-century north porch with its groined roof, and a beautiful double doorway, now blocked up, leading from the porch to S. Thomas's chapel. West of the porch, in the Archdeacon's chapel, is another blocked window, a

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fine example of the Decorated type. The nave is of the first half of the fourteenth century, and was built



ARCHDEACON'S CHAPEL. HOLY TRINITY CHURCH

before the chancel. The fresco of the Last Judgment, which could once be discerned above the chancel arch, is now obliterated. As in S. Michael's the mullions of the fifteenth-century clear-story windows are con-

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tinued to the top of the arches of the nave, forming a series of stone panels. Marler's-chapel, leading out of the north chancel-aisle, is the latest part of the structure, belonging to the sixteenth century. The stone pulpit dates from about 1470. The lectern, which is also antique, aroused the suspicions of the Puritans, and in 1654 there was some talk of selling it, a transaction which was happily not accomplished, though the "eagle" at S. Michael's, the gift of William Botoner, had been sold at so much the pound a few years before.

Scarcely a vestige now remains of the ancient stained glass which once made the church beautiful. Its disappearance was owing not perhaps so much to Puritan zeal, as to the deliberate action of the authorities in the last century. From 1774 to 1787 the masons of Coventry must have revelled in the work of mutilating the window traceries, and the old glass after being taken down was never put back. The old sexton told the antiquary, Sharp, particulars of the famous window, wherein Leofric and Godiva were represented, the former holding a charter with the words :

" I, Luriche, for love of thee
Doe make Coventre Tol-free."

But this was removed in 1779; but a few last fragments of glass are now in the window of the Arch-deacon's chapel. A small figure is seen holding a spray of leaves and part of a horse; there are also architectural fragments in the stained glass that appear in Stukeley's drawing of the Godiva window, but they are very insignificant and broken.

In this same chapel is a brass to John Whitehead (1597) and his two wives in Elizabethan costume, and a monument in Philemon Holland (1636), once master of the grammar school, translator of Camden's *Britannia*. The font is of the fifteenth century. Close to the west door is a fine Elizabethan alms-box.

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To the north of Trinity churchyard are the Cathedral ruins. Little more than the bases of a few fine pillars are left of the once splendid minster, dedicated to S. Mary, S. Peter, S. Osburg, and All Saints. From the gates of Trinity church you pass the top of the picturesque Butcher Row, and, if time does not fail you, may turn down Cross Cheaping—alas that the cross should be no longer there!—till you come to the Old Grammar School, at the corner of Hales Street. This was the ancient home of the Hospitallers, who tended the infirm and sick, but was converted after the Reformation into a free grammar school. It is now a parish room; but round the walls of the ancient chapel of the Hospitallers are the old stalls they once occupied, cut and hacked by many generations of schoolboys. The east window is a fine specimen of nearly flamboyant tracery. Here Dugdale received his education; also the Davenports and a great many more who have never risen to fame in the world. Mr Tovey, father of Milton's Cambridge tutor, and Philemon Holland, the "translator-general of his age," were masters here.

On returning up the Broadgate to the cross roads give a glance at the authentic "Peeping Tom" looking out of a window in the top storey of the King's Head Inn. It is a full-length wooden statue of a man in armour, with helmet, greaves, and sandals; the arms are cut off at the elbows. What the statue anciently represented is, I believe, unknown.

The turning to the right, Smithford Street, leads to S. John's Church, another building raised to the glory of God and the guild of the Holy Trinity, S. Mary, S. John Baptist, and S. Catherine. Nothing of the present church, built, it may be remembered, in some sort to commemorate the king's victory at Sluys, is earlier than 1357, for the first church, begun in 1345 and consecrated in 1350, disappeared before the more ambitious plans of a later time. Prayers were said therein for

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Isabella's "dear lord Edward," at whose tomb at Gloucester Cathedral so many pilgrims paid their devotions, to the no small gain of the ecclesiastics of that place. The new church at Bablake owed its south aisle—still called after his name—to William Walschewan and Christiana his wife, which Walschewan is described as "valet" (vadlettus) to Queen Isabell, and had of her gift control over the Drapery, where vent was made of "foreign" cloth brought to be sold within the city. The south (Walschewan's) aisle and the north clear-story are the oldest portions of the now existing building, the south clear-story, which is of different pattern, is not earlier than the fifteenth century, though it contrasts very favourably with the scheme employed both at Trinity and S. Michael's.¹ Off the north chancel-aisle was a hermitage, whereof traces have been found on the site of the present vestry. The church is small, the nave being but of three bays' length, but it is lofty and of fine proportion. The modern screen, however, strikes an inharmonious note.

Oblong as to ground-plan, though, curiously enough, never quite rectangular, the building, when seen from outside, is cruciform as to clear-story, and from the crossing springs a high fortress-like lantern tower with turrets or bartizans at the angles of the battlements. The east and west windows are restorations, and indeed the many vicissitudes this church has undergone, and its low situation, have frequently exposed it to two evils—restorations and floods. Granted to the corporation after the suppression of the guilds and chantries in 1548, the church was used as a kind of religious lecture-hall in 1608 and for some years later; and in 1648 as quarters for the Scots prisoners taken at Preston. The fabric was described as in a state of sad neglect in 1734, when it was linked to a parish for the first time in its history.

Close by the church and forming the view of all views

¹ Woodhouse, *Churches of Coventry*.

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to be dwelt on in the city, stand two picturesque black and white timbered houses, one given by John Bond for



THE STAIRCASE. OLD BABLAKE SCHOOL

an almshouse for aged and decayed folk recommended by the Trinity guild, and the other the Bablake school raised by the benevolence of Mr Wheatley in the

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sixteenth century. Bond's Hospital, which contains some good seventeenth-century furniture, has been restored ; but by preternatural good luck Wheatley's School escaped that devastating touch. The hall contains roof timbers possibly older than the bulk of the building, and an ancient staircase ; and the room to the left on the ground floor has a fine Jacobean mantelpiece which came from Sir Orlando Bridgman's house in Little Park Street. There is an open gallery both on the ground floor and the upper storey.

The sight of these houses, grandly planned and strongly built, with lovely gables where barge-board and finial are marvels of the house-carver's art, is a fitting close to a day in Coventry. Let us hope that no restorer, modern builder, well-meaning or enterprising commercial man will ever rob us of the loveliness of Bond's Hospital and Wheatley's School at Bablake.

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